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Weird Tales

25¢

JANUARY

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the story of a weird curse

By CYRIL MAND

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MEDUSA'S COIL

a grim and tragic tale

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Virgil Finlay

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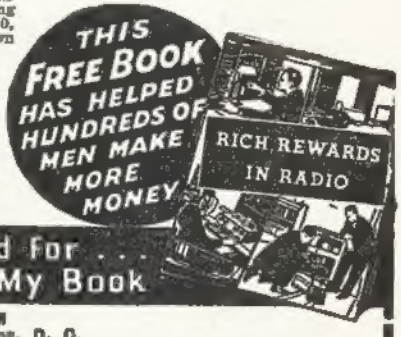

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A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

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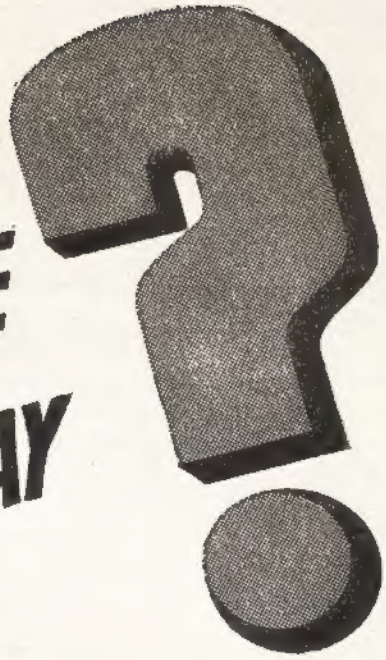

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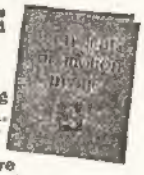

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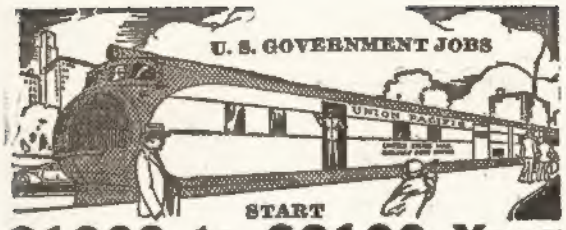

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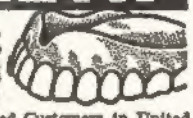

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29x4.75	20	2.50	1.25	34x4	3.25	1.35
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28x5.25	18	2.90	1.25	30x5	3.65	1.65
29x5.25	19	2.95	1.35	33x5	3.75	1.75
30x5.25	20	2.95	1.35	34x5	3.95	1.75
31x5.25	21	3.25	1.35			
6.50	17	3.25	1.40			
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"Salome, wanton of the seven veils, white witch and wooer of all evil."

Waxworks

By ROBERT BLOCH

The story of a wax statue that was instinct with evil allure—a fascinating tale of a weird crime, that rises to a climax of horror

IT HAD been a dull day for Bertrand before his discovery of the waxworks — a dark, foggy day which he had spent in tramping aimlessly about the dingy streets of the quay district he loved. It had been a dull day, but none the less it was of a sort that Bertrand's imaginative nature best loved. He found a morose enjoyment in the feel of the stinging sleet

upon his face; liked, too, the sensation of semi-blindness induced by the nebulosity of outline conjured up with the fog. Mist made the dingy buildings and the narrow streets that threaded crookedly between them seem unreal and grotesque; the commonplace stone structures squatted in the blueness like vast, inanimate monsters carven from cyclopean stone.

So, at least, thought Bertrand, in his somewhat maudlin fashion. For Bertrand was a poet—a very bad poet, with the sentimentally esoteric nature such beings affect. He lived in a garret in the dock district, ate crusts of bread, and fancied himself very much put upon by the world. In moments of self-pity, which were frequent, he made certain mental comparisons between his estate and that of the late François Villon. These estimates were none too flattering to the latter gentleman; for after all, Villon had been a pimp and a thief, whereas Bertrand was neither. Bertrand was just a very honorable young man whom people had not yet learned to appreciate, and if he starved now, posterity would spread him a pretty feast. So his thoughts ran a good part of the time, and days of fog like this were ideal for such personal compassions. It was warm enough in Bertrand's garret, and there was food there; for after all, his parents in Marseilles did send him money regularly, under the impression that he was a student at the college. Yes, the garret was a fine refuge on such a dismal afternoon, and Bertrand could have been hard at work on one of those noble sonnets he was always intending to produce. But no, he must wander about in the fog, and think things out for himself. It was so—romantic—he grudgingly conceded, in his mind, for he hated to use "trite" expressions.

This "romantic" phase was beginning to pall on the young man after an hour's walk about the wharves; sleet and drizzling rain had dampened more than his ardor. Then too, he had just discovered in himself a most unpoetic case of the snuffles.

In consequence, he was more than heartened by the sight of the dim lamp that shone through the murk from a dark basement doorway between two houses on this obscure side street. The lantern served to illuminate a sign proclaiming *Waxworks Within*.

Upon reading this legend, Bertrand felt a faint tinge of disappointment. He had hoped that the beacon ornamented the door of a tavern, for our poet was given to the bottle at those odd times when he found himself in funds. None the less, the light was a symbol of warmth and shelter within, and perhaps the waxworks would be interesting.

He went down the steps, opened the dark door, and stepped, shivering slightly at the sudden change, into a warm, dimly lit hallway.

A fat little man in a greasy cap shuffled out from behind a side door and took his three francs with a shrug of surprise, as if wordlessly indicating his amazement at securing a customer at such a time.

Bertrand glanced down the plain hall as he removed his wet jacket. His fastidious nose wrinkled slightly at the musty odor about the place; this, combined with the peculiar acridity common only to discarded wet garments in a warm room, gave the air a genuine "museum smell."

As he walked down the hall to the wide doorway leading into the exhibit he was conscious of a subtle heightening of his melancholy, which the fog had so visibly augmented. Here in this shabby darkness he felt a profound

spiritual depression. Without knowing it, he slipped from self-dramatization into reality. His mind craved morbidity, his thoughts were steeped in umber stillness . . . steeped in umber stillness . . . he must remember that, and write it down.

He was, in point of fact, quite properly in the mood for the waxworks exhibit which he now beheld. It was a carnival of the gruesome and the macabre.

Once, in a moment of temporary affluence, Bertrand and a feminine companion had visited the great Madame Tussaud's. His memories of the occasion were vague, and dealt more fully with the charms of the young lady than with the rather inanimate attractions of the statuary. But as he recalled it, the wax figures had been those of historically prominent and journalistically notorious personages; representations of generals and statesmen and movie stars. This had been Bertrand's sole experience in viewing such objects, save for the odious Punch and Judy displays in the traveling carnival companies he visited during his far-off childhood. (He was twenty-three.)

A CASUAL glance served to show that these waxworks were of a vastly different nature.

A long vast chamber stretched before him—a surprisingly large chamber for such an obscure enterprise, he thought. It was low-ceilinged, and the fog outside the narrow windows lent an effective dimness to the already poor lighting-arrangements; so that the atmosphere was one of profound gloom appropriate to the scene.

An army of still white figures paraded in arrested processional against the dingy walls—an army of stiffly-staring corpses—an army of mummified, embalmed, petrified, ossified . . . he ran out of descriptive terminology, and realized guiltily that his words were pitifully inadequate to describe the impressiveness of these silent wax figures. They held an attitude of arrested motion which in turn captured a peculiar feeling of ominous *waiting*. They seemed to have just died; or rather to have been frozen in some airy, invisible ice that was about to melt and release them once again at any moment.

For they were realistic. And the lighting-effects of the room disguised what crudities and blemishes might exist. Bertrand began to walk along the left wall, and gazed intently at each figure or group of figures.

The subject-matter of these exhibits was harrowing to the extreme. Crime was the theme—perverse and dreadful crime. The monster Landru crept upon his sleeping wife in the night, and see, the maniac Tolours lurks with bloody knife behind the barrels as his tiny son descends the cellar stairs. Three men sit within an open boat, and one is armless, legless, headless, while the others feast. . . . Gilles de Retz stands before the altar, and his beard is dabbled red as he holds his basin high; the sacrifice lies broken at his feet . . . a woman writhes upon the wheel and the sharp-fanged rats race round and round the dungeon floor . . . flayed alive is he that hangs upon the gibbet, and giant Dessalines advances with a leaded whip . . . the murderer Vardac stands accused while from his suitcase trickles a red stain . . . the fat monk Omelée digs within his crypt amidst the barrels of bones. . . . Here sleeping Evil rises from hidden depths in men's souls and slyly grins.

Bertrand saw and shuddered. There was a disturbingly artful verisimilitude in the depiction of these frights which

made him ill at ease. They were so cunningly, so artfully conceived! The details of background and setting seemed minutely authentic, and the figures themselves seemed to be the products of a master craftsmanship. Their simulation of life was startling; their molder had instilled genuine action into pose and posture, so that each pictured movement was actually portrayed. And the heads, with the expressions on the faces, were astonishingly real. They glared and twisted with rage, lust, anger; contorted and blenched with fear, shock, agony. The eyes stared with a more than glassy reality, the hair hung naturally from bearded cheeks, lips opened as though warm with breath.

So they stood, the waxworks figures, each living eternally the supreme moment of the horror which justified their existence as images and damned their souls as living men.

Bertrand saw them all. Little sighs proclaimed the characters in each pictured melodrama in suitably grandiloquent style, and cards recited bloody histories of famous misdeeds.

Bertrand read them self-consciously. He knew that what he saw was cheapest theatricalism, sensational yellow-journal stuff at its worst; the type of lurid gore-parading in which the moron-mind delights. But he fancied that there was something rather grand about this whole insane array of melodramatics; they seemed to have a certain *intensity* which ordinary life shuns to express in daily actions. He wondered as he stared whether or not this feeling of intensity was one of the attractions for the ordinary foolish sensation-hunters; whether or not they felt it, and were vaguely envious of its contrast to their sedulously eventless lives. And he almost chuckled when he realized that the pictured scenes were real; that their counterparts had actually existed—moreover, were still existing today, in a hundred hidden places. Yes, murderers and rapists and mad fiends crouched unknown even now, waiting to strike. Some of them would be exposed, others die in secrecy inviolate; but their deeds went on—their gory, melodramatic deeds.

THE young poet walked on. He was all alone in this room, and the sight of the blue fog-fingers still clawing at the window-panes encouraged him to take his leisure. He spent much time in noting the perfections of the figures. Gradually he approached the right wall of the hall, which seemed to be given over to the bloody scenes of actual recorded history; the burnings, pillagings, tortures and massacres of olden times. Here too he was forced to concede admiration for the designers of the displays; historical costuming was splendid throughout. There must be many details to this waxwork-making business, he thought, as he examined a particularly noteworthy figure of the Emperor Tiberius Cæsar at sport in the torture chamber.

Then he saw her. She was standing statue-still, straight and poised and lovely. She was girl, woman, goddess; imperially slender, with the delicious curves of a succubus fashioned in dreams.

Bertrand's poet-eyes deigned to notice actual physical details, though his bemused brain must translate them anew into elaborate imagery. Thus her splendid auburn hair was a crimson cloud, her smiling, finely-chiseled face a mask of enchantment, her starry blue eyes twin pools in which a soul must drown. Her parted lips were curved as though in voluptuous delight, and from them her tongue protruded like a little

red dagger whose stab was joy. She wore a filmy, bejeweled robe of sorts, which only served to accentuate the white beauty of the body it half revealed beneath.

Actually, she was a very pretty red-headed woman, and she was wax—common, ordinary wax, very much of the sort which had served to fashion the form of Jack the Ripper. Her pose was commonplace, but arresting; she stood tiptoe with outstretched arms that held a silver salver; stood before King Herod on his throne. For she was Salome, wanton of the seven veils, white witch and wooer of all evil.

Bertrand stared into her wicked oval face, the eyes of which seemed to flicker with amusement in returning his gaze. And he thought that she was the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld, and the most dreadful. Her slim hands held a silver platter, and on it rested the severed head . . . the gory, decapitated head of John the Baptist, lying with stony eyes, death-bright in a pool of blood.

Bertrand didn't move. He simply looked at the woman. A queer impulse to address her came over him. She was mocking his goggle-eyed gazings, she thought him rude. Speak, man! He wanted to tell her—that he loved her.

Bertrand realized this with a thrill of pain that was almost horror. H *did* love her, love her wildly beyond all dreams of love. He wanted her—this woman who was only wax. It was torture to look at her, the ache of her beauty was intolerable when he realized that she was unattainable. What irony! To fall in love with a waxwork!—he must be mad.

But how poetic it was, Bertrand pondered. And not so highly original at that.

He'd read of similar cases, seen some claptrap dramatizations of the theme which was as old as Pygmalion and his statue.

Reason wouldn't help him, he realized with a sort of despair. He loved her beauty and her menace, always would. He was that sort of poet.

It was amazing, finally to glance up and see the sun sullenly shining through the windows from which fog had fled. How long had he been gaping here? Bertrand turned away, after one last soul-wrenching look at the object of his adoration.

"I'll come back," he whispered. Then he blushed guiltily to himself and hurried down the hall to the door.

2

He came back the next day. And the next. He became familiar with the pudgy gray features of the little fat man who seemed to be the sole attendant at the door; grew to know the dusty museum and its contents. He learned that visitors were scarce these days, and discovered late afternoon was the ideal time for his hours of worship.

For worship it was. He would stand silently before the cryptically smiling statue, and stare enraptured into the maddening cruelty of her eyes. Sometimes he would mumble bits of the verse with which he struggled by night; often he would plead mad lover's entreaties meant for waxen ears. But red-haired Salome only stared back at him in return, and regarded his ravings with a set and cryptic smile.

It was odd that he never inquired about the statue or any of the others until the day he spoke with the little fat attendant.

The squat, gray-haired man approached him one day at twilight and entered into conversation, thus ending

a revery in a manner which greatly annoyed the love-sick Bertrand.

"Pretty, eh?" said the gray-haired man, in the coarse, vulgar voice such unfeeling dolts habitually possess. "I modeled her from my wife, y'know."

His *wife! His* wife—this shabby little old fat fool? Bertrand felt that he was really going mad, until the next words of his companion dispelled the notion.

"Years ago, of course."

But she was alive—real—alive! His heart leaped.

"Yes. She's dead a long time now, of course."

Dead! Gone; as far away as ever, only this taunting waxen shell remaining. Bertrand must talk to this little fool, draw him out. There was so much he had to know. But in a moment he found that there was no need to "draw out" his companion; loneliness evidently begot garrulity upon the little man's part. He mumbled on in his gruff, crude fashion.

"Clever work, isn't it?" The gray-haired dolt was surveying the wax figure in a manner which Bertrand found peculiarly repulsive. There was in his eyes no adoration for the being represented; only the unfeeling appraisal of a craftsman commenting on his handiwork. He was admiring the wax, not the woman.

"My best," mused the little man.

And to think that he had once possessed *her!* . . . Bertrand was sickened dreadfully at the fellow's callousness. But the man did not seem to notice. He kept glancing from the statue to Bertrand and back again, meanwhile keeping up a steady stream of comment and information.

Monsieur must be interested in the museum, eh? He seemed to be a frequent visitor. Good work, wasn't it? He, Pierre Jacquelin, had done it all. Yes, he had learned the waxworks business well in the past eight years. It cost money to hire assistants; so save for occasional group-pieces, Jacquelin had fashioned all the figures himself. People had done him the honor of favorably comparing his work to Tussaud's. No doubt he could get a place on the staff there, but he preferred to run a quiet business of his own. Besides, there was less notoriety. But the figures were good, weren't they? That's where his medical knowledge served him. Yes, it had been Doctor Jacquelin in the old days.

Monsieur admired his wife, didn't he? Well, that was strange—there had been others. They too came regularly. No—no need to take offense. It would be silly to be jealous of a wax image. But it was peculiar the way men still came; some of them not even knowing about the crime.

The crime?

Something in the little man's gray face as he mentioned it caused Bertrand to perk up his ears, to ask questions. The old fellow showed no hesitation in answering.

"Can it be that you do not know?" he said. "Ah well, time passes and one forgets the newspapers. It was not a pleasant thing—I wanted to be alone then, and the notoriety caused me to abandon practise. That is how I began here; to get away from it all. She caused it."

He pointed at the statue.

"The Jacquelin case, they called it—because of my wife, you know. I knew nothing until the trial. She was young, alone in Paris when I married her. I knew nothing of her past. I had my practise, I was busy, away a great deal of the time. I never suspected. She was pathological, *Monsieur*. I had sus-

pected certain things from her conduct, but I loved her and never guessed.

"I brought a patient to the house—an old man. He was quite ill, and she nursed him very devotedly. One night I came in quite late and found him dead. She had cut his throat with a surgical knife—I came upon her silently, you understand—and she was attempting to go further.

"The police took her away. At the trial it all came out; about the young fellow at Brest she had done in, and the two husbands she had disposed of at Lyons and Liège. And she confessed to other crimes; five in all. Decapitation.

"Oh, I was broken up over it, I can tell you! That was years ago, and I was younger then. I loved her, and when she admitted that she had planned to finish me off next I felt—well, never mind. She had been a good wife, you see, quiet and gentle and loving. You can see for yourself how beautiful she was. And to discover that she was mad! A murderess like that . . . it was terrible.

"I did my best. I still wanted her, after all that. It is hard to explain. We tried to plead insanity. But she was convicted, and they sent her to the guillotine."

How badly he tells the story! thought Bertrand. Material for tragedy here, and he bungles it into a farce! When will Life live up to Art?

"My medical practise was ruined, of course. The papers, the publicity, that was fatal. I had lost everything. Then I began this. I'd made plaster busts, medical figures, to earn a little extra through the years. So I took my savings and began the museum. All these misfortunes had upset me, I can tell you, and I was in a bad way when I started. I had become interested in crime, for obvious reasons. That is why I specialized in this sort of thing."

The little man smiled a bit tolerantly, as though in memory of things long dead and forgotten—his emotions. He tapped Bertrand on the chest with a jollity which the latter found hideous.

"What I did was a capital joke, eh? I got permission from the authorities to go down to the morgue. The execution had been delayed, and my business here was well started; I had learned my technique. So I went down to the morgue after the guillotining, understand, and made a model of my wife. From life—or death, rather. Yes, I made the model, and it's a grand joke. She had beheaded, and now she was beheaded. So why not make her Salome? John the Baptist was beheaded, too, wasn't he? Quite a jest!"

The little man's face fell a bit, and his pale gray eyes grew bright.

"Perhaps it wasn't such a joke, *Monsieur*. To tell the truth, at the time I did it for revenge. I hated her for the way she had broken my life; hated her because I still loved her in spite of what she had done. And there was more irony than humor in my doings. I wanted her in wax, to stand here and remind me of my life; my love and her crime.

"But that was years ago. The world has forgotten, and I have, too. Now she is just a beautiful figure—my best figure.

"Somehow I have never again approached the art; and I think you will agree with me that it is art. I have never achieved such perfection, though I've learned more mastery with the years. Men come in and stare at her, you know; the way you do. I don't believe many of them know the story, but if they did, they would still come. You

will come again, won't you—even though you know?"

Bertrand nodded bruskly as he turned and hurried away. He was playing the fool, rushing out like a child. This he knew, and he cursed himself under his breath even as he ran from the museum and the hateful little old man.

He was a fool. His head throbbed. Why did he hate the man—her husband? Why did he hate her because she had once lived, and killed? If the story were true—and it was. He remembered something of the Jacquelin case; vague headlines dimmed by the passage of years. He'd probably shuddered over the penny-dreadful newspaper versions as a boy. Why did he feel as though he were in torment? A wax statue of a dead murderess, made by her stupid, insensate brute of a husband. Other men came and stared—he hated them, too.

He was losing his mind. This was worse than silly, it was insane. He must never go back there; must forget all about the dead, and the lost that could never be his. Her husband had forgotten, the world had not remembered. Yes. He had made his decision. Never again. . . .

He was very glad that the place was deserted the next day as he prayed before the silent, red-haired beauty of Salome.

3

A FEW days later, Colonel Bertroux came to his lodging. An insufferable boor, the colonel; a close friend of his family—a retired officer and a born meddler. It did not take Bertrand long to discover that his worried parents had sent the colonel down to "reason" with him.

It was the sort of thing they would do, and the sort of thing a pompous ass like the old colonel would enjoy doing. He was brusk, dignified, pedantic. He called Bertrand "my dear boy," and wasted no time in coming to the point. He wanted Bertrand to give up his "foolishness" and return home to settle down. The family butcher shop—he belonged there, not in a Paris attic. No, the colonel was not interested in this "poetry scribbling." He came to "reason" with Bertrand.

And more of the same thing, until Bertrand was half frantic with exasperation. He could not insult the old dodderer, try as he may. The man was too stupid to understand his satirical deprecations. He followed Bertrand about the streets when he ate, and took it for granted that he was invited. He "put up" at a near-by hostelry and spent his first night in converation. He was absurdly confident that "the dear boy" would heed his wisdom.

Bertrand gave up after that evening. The colonel put in his appearance again at noon, just as Bertrand was about to leave for the museum. Despite pointed hints, Colonel Bertroux would be only too glad to accompany him to the waxworks. He did.

Once inside the place, Bertrand sank into the strange mood of mysterious excitement he had now learned to expect—no, to hunger for. The colonel's asinine commentaries on the criminal displays he was able to ignore. His reveries drowned out the conversational background.

They approached *her*. Bertrand said nothing—stood silent on the spot, though his eyes cried out. He gazed, devoured. She mocked. Silently they duelled, as minutes fled down the path of eternity.

Abruptly, Bertrand jerked back to consciousness, blinking like a sleeper

just awakened from an enthralling and ecstatic dream. Then he stared.

The colonel was still beside him, and he was gaping at the statue of Salome with utter bemusement. On his face was a look of wonder so alien and somehow *youthful* that Bertrand was amazed. The man was fascinated—as fascinated as he was!

The colonel? It was impossible! He couldn't have—not he. But he had. He was. He felt it, loved her too!

Bertrand wanted to laugh, at first. But as he looked into that utterly absorbed old face once again he felt that tears might be more appropriate. He understood. There was something about this woman that called forth the dreams buried in the soul of every man, old or young. She was so gorgeously aloof, so wickedly wanton.

Bertrand glanced again at her evil tenderness, noted the shapely grace with which she stood holding that horrid head.

That horrid head—it was different, today. Not the black-haired, blue-eyed, glassy-staring head he had seen on previous visits. What was wrong?

A touch on his shoulder. The little gray-haired owner of the waxworks, horribly solicitous.

"Noticed it, eh?" he mumbled. "Deplorable accident; the old head was accidentally broken. One of her—her gentlemen friends tried to poke at it with an umbrella and it fell. I substituted this, while repairing the original. But it does detract."

Colonel Bertroux had glanced up from his shattered reveries. The little gray-haired man fawned on him.

"Pretty, eh?" he began. "I modeled her from my wife, y'know."

And he proceeded to tell the whole grim story, just as Bertrand had it from him a week before. He told it just as badly, and in practically the same words.

Bertrand watched the sick-hurt look on the colonel's face, and wondered with a start if he had not appeared much the same way when he listened for the first time.

In curious parallel to his own behavior, it was the colonel who turned on his heel and walked away at the conclusion of the narrative. Bertrand followed, feeling the eyes of the little gray man appraising their departing backs in a quizzical fashion.

THEY reached the street and walked in silence. The colonel's face still wore that dazed expression. At the door of his lodging, the colonel turned to him. His voice was curiously hushed.

"I—I think I'm beginning to understand, my boy. I'll not trouble you again. I'm going back."

He marched up the street, shoulders strangely erect, leaving Bertrand to ponder.

Not a word about the waxworks incident. Nothing! But he loved her too. Strange—the whole affair was strange. Was the colonel going away or *fleeing?*

The little man had retold his story with such curious readiness. It was almost as though he had rehearsed it. Could it be that the entire business was a hoax of some sort? Perhaps it was all a fabrication, a clever ruse on the part of the museum-keeper.

Yes, that must be the explanation. Some artist had sold him the wax figure; he noted that its realistic beauty attracted lonely men, and concocted the story of a notorious murderess to fit the statue's history. The case might be real enough, but the little man did not look as though he had ever been the husband

of a murderess. Not *her* husband. The story was just bait, a lure to keep the men coming, keep their money rolling in. With a start, Bertrand computed the amount in francs he had spent visiting the museum these past weeks. It was considerable. Clever schemer!

Still, the real attraction lay in the statue itself. The figure was so beautiful, so *alive* in its loveliness, through which there breathed a sort of alluring wickedness. Salome was a red witch, and there was a mystery in her which Bertrand felt he was soon to penetrate. He had to understand that smile and its spell over him.

So thinking, he retired. And the next few days he wrote. He started an epic poem of surprising promise, and labored without pause. He was thankful the colonel had left; grateful to *her* for helping. Perhaps she did understand; perhaps she was real; mayhap she heard his wild mutterings in the night, his lonely entreaties cast up to the stars. Perchance in some far-off poet's Avalon she waited, or in some flaming poet's Hell. He would find her. . . .

He told her that the next day when he thanked her for removing Colonel Bertroux. He was going to recite to her a stanza of his sonnet when he became aware that the eyes of the museum keeper rested on him from a distance down the hall.

He ceased his mutterings, crimson with shame. Spying on him? How often had he gloated over the anguish of the poor wretches enmeshed in her beauty? Withered little beast!

Bertrand tried to look away. He stared at the new head of John the Baptist. Substitute, eh? He wondered under what circumstances the original had been cracked. Some fool with an umbrella, the little man had said. Trying to touch her—as though such a desire were granted a mere mortal! This substitute head was fine, though; as realistic as the first. The closed eyes of the blond young man lent a rather morbid note lacking in the pallid stare of the other. Still, it was not exactly John the Baptist. Hm.

The little man was still staring. Bertrand cursed under his breath and turned away. No more peace today. He hurried down the hall, trying to appear oblivious. As he neared the door he bent his head and sought to avoid the stare of the keeper. In doing so he almost ran into the oncoming figure of a visitor. He muttered a hasty "Your pardon, please" and left. Turning back he gazed with a shock at the retreating back of the man he had jostled.

Was he mad, or did he perceive the shoulders of Colonel Bertroux?

But Bertroux had left—or had he? Was he lured back to worship in privacy, as Bertrand worshiped; as others did? Would the little old man stare at him? Had Salome ensnared another?

Bertrand wondered. The next few days he came at odd hours, hoping to encounter the colonel. He was interested. He wanted to question the older man; seek to learn if he too were affected by this puzzling infatuation for a waxen image.

Bertrand could have questioned the little gray museum keeper concerning his friend, but he felt a vague dislike for the fellow which restrained him. If the keeper's story were a hoax he hated the imposture; if true, he could not forgive him for having known, for having embraced a beauty Bertrand would have given his life to possess.

The poet left the museum in a state of mental anguish. He hated the place, hated its keeper; hated *her* because his

love chained him. Must he come to this dark old dungeon forever, mutely suffering away his life for a glimpse of beauty forever denied him? Must he walk past mocking murderers in gloom to gaze into the eyes of his waxen tormentress? How long? The mystery was unseating his reason. How long?

4

WEARILY he climbed the steps to his room. His key turned the lock, his door opened on lighted brilliance, and he stepped forward in surprise to confront—Colonel Bertroux.

The old man was seated in the easy-chair, his elbows resting on the table as he faced the poet.

"Pardon this intrusion, boy," said the colonel. "I used a skeleton key to enter. I could have waited outside for you, but I prefer remaining some place where I am locked in."

His voice was so grave and his face so serious as he spoke these last words that Bertrand accepted their import without questioning.

He framed a reply; he wanted to inquire why Bertroux had not left town, if it had indeed been he whom the poet had seen leaving the museum a few hours previous. But the older man lifted a hand in a tired gesture and motioned Bertrand to a seat on the couch. His dim blue eyes stared out from a face lined with exhaustion.

"Let me explain this visit," he began. "But first, a few questions. I beg of you to answer these truthfully, my boy. Much depends on your veracity, as you shall learn."

Bertrand nodded, impressed by the utter gravity of his visitor.

"First," said the colonel, "I want to know just how long you have been visiting that wax museum."

"About a month. In fact, a month ago tomorrow I made my initial visit."

"And just how did you come to go there, of all places?"

Bertrand explained the circumstances of the fog, the chance glimpse of the sign with its hint of shelter. The colonel listened intently.

"Did the keeper speak to you during that first visit?" he asked.

"No."

The old man started, blinked in puzzlement. He mumbled to himself. "Strange . . . eliminates hypnosis . . . latent force in the statue . . . never took that rot about demonology seriously."

He checked himself hastily, and his glance met Bertrand's once again. He spoke very slowly.

"Then it was—*she*—who drew you back?"

There was that in his voice which caused Bertrand to affirm the truth; caused him to pour out his story in a ceaseless rush of words untouched by any attempt at concealment or adornment of the queer tale. At its conclusion the old man sighed, heavily. He stared at the floor for a long time.

"I thought as much, my boy," Colonel Bertroux said. "Your family sent me down suspecting that something—or rather, someone, was holding you here. I had guessed that it was a woman, but I never dreamed that she was a woman of wax. But when you took me to the museum and I saw how you gazed at that statue, I knew. After looking at the image myself, I knew and understood far more. And then I heard the tale of the museum keeper. It started me thinking—if think I could, with a mind bemused by that damnable beauty of the cursed figure.

"At first, when I bid you good-bye, I intended to go. Not so much for your sake, but for my own. Yes, I shall ad-

mit it frankly, I feared for myself. Bertrand, you understand the power that queer image holds over you, and other men as well, if the keeper is to be believed. That power it exercised upon me. I was frightened by the feeling I, an old man long forsaken by thoughts of love, experienced on seeing that red witch."

Bertrand stared at the colonel, who continued without heed.

"But I did not go back. The next day I returned to the museum in the morning, to gaze as you gazed, alone. And after an hour before that strange simalacrum, I left in a daze of wonder commingled with practical alarm. Whatever power that statue possessed, it was not good, or right, or wholly fashioned by sanity.

"I acted on impulse. I recalled the story of the museum keeper, this man Jacquelin. I went down to the newspaper offices to search the files. At last I found the case.

"Jacquelin had stated that the affair occurred many years ago, but he had not said just how many. My dear boy, that case was closed *over thirty years ago!*"

Bertrand's gasp was cut short as Bertroux rushed on.

"It was true, all true. There was a murder, and the wife of Doctor Jacquelin was convicted of it. It did come out that she had perpetrated five similar crimes under various names, and the journals of the day made capital out of certain testimony that was formally disbarred. This testimony spoke of wizardry, and hinted that Madame Jacquelin was a witch, whose mad butcherings were actuated by a sort of sacrificial frenzy. The cult of the ancient goddess Hecate was mentioned, and the prosecution hinted that the red-headed woman was a priestess of some sort whose deeds constituted a monstrous worship. This offering of male blood in honor of a half-forgotten pagan deity was, naturally, disallowed as testimony; but there was enough evidence to convict the woman of actual killings.

"It was fact, remember. And I uncovered things in the old papers of which this Jacquelin did not speak. The witchcraft theory was not formally recognized, but it got the doctor himself banned from the practise of medicine. It was more than substantiated that he was beginning to indulge in certain practises, encouraged by his wife; little pilferings of blood and flesh and sometimes vital organs from corpses in the morgues. That seems to be the real reason why he abandoned his practise after the trial and execution.

"The narrative about obtaining his wife's body from the morgue for sculpturing purposes is not mentioned, but there *is* an item about the body being *stolen*. And Jacquelin left Paris after the execution, thirty-seven years ago!"

THE colonel's voice was harsh.

"You can imagine what this discovery did to me. I searched through year after year in the files, trying to trace the path of the man. Never did I find the name of Jacquelin mentioned. But occasionally little disturbing items about traveling waxworks exhibits cropped up. There was a wagon show run under the name of *Pallidi* which toured the Basque provinces in 1916, and after it left one town the bodies of two young men were discovered buried beneath the lot where the exhibition tent had been pitched. They were headless.

"A *George Balto* operated for a time in Antwerp under almost identical conditions about '24. He was called in to

testify concerning the case of a mutilated body found in the streets outside his museum one morning, but was exonerated. There are other couplings of disappearance connected with waxworks, but the names and dates vary. In two of the later ones, however, the press reports distinctly describe a 'short, gray-haired proprietor.'

"What does it all mean? I wondered. My first impulse was to communicate with the *Sureté,* but a pause convinced me that wild theories do not concern the police. There was much to be learned. The real mystery was just why men continue to stare at that statue. What is its power? I cast about for an explanation; for a time I guessed that the proprietor might hypnotize his solitary male visitors, using the statue as a medium. But why? For what purpose? And neither you nor myself was so hypnotized. No, there's something about that image alone; some secret power connected with it that smacks of—I must admit it—sorcery. She's like one of those ancient lamias one reads about in fairy-tales. One can't escape her.

"I couldn't. After leaving the newspaper offices that afternoon I went back. I told myself that I was going to interview the little gray man, clear up the mystery. But in my heart I knew better. I brushed him aside as I entered the place and sought the statue. Once again I stared into her face and that terrible fascination of evil beauty flooded me. I tried to read her secret but she read mine. I felt that she knew my emotion toward her, and that she rejoiced and exercised her cold power to rule my mind.

"I left in a daze. That evening at the hotel, while I tried to reason things out, to plan a course of action, I felt a strange urge to go back. It cut across my thoughts, and before I knew it I was on the street, walking toward the museum. It was dark, and I returned home. The longing persisted. Before I could sleep I was forced to bolt my door."

The colonel turned a sober face to Bertrand as he whispered.

"You, my friend, went to her willingly every day. Your torment at her aloofness was slight compared to mine, which fought against her enchantment. Because I would not go willingly she compelled. Her anguishing memory haunted me. This morning, as I started here to see you, she forced my footsteps to the museum. That's why men go there—if willing, like you, they worship unbidden. If unwilling, she commands and they come. I went today. When you came I was ashamed and left. Then I came here, to wait, and opened your door so that I might lock it from the inside and fight to keep from leaving until I could see you. I had to tell you this so that we might act together."

"What do you propose?" Bertrand asked. It was strange how earnestly he believed the other's story; he could realize only too easily that his beloved was evil without ceasing to adore her. He knew that he must fight against her siren magic even while his heart cried out to her. The colonel, he understood, shared his feelings. Therefore he asked eagerly:

"We will go to the museum tomorrow," the colonel said. "Together we will be strong enough to fight against that power, suggestion—whatever it is. We can speak frankly to Jacquelin, hear him out. If he refuses to talk, we shall go to the police. I am convinced that there is something unnatural about all this; murder, hypnotism, magic, or just plain imagination, we

must get to the bottom of it quickly. I fear for you, and for myself. That cursed statue is chaining me to the spot, and always it seeks to draw me back. Let us clear up this affair tomorrow, before it is too late."

"Yes," Bertrand agreed, dully.

"Good. I will come for you about one in the afternoon. You will be ready?"

Bowing at Bertrand's nod of assent, the colonel withdrew.

5

THE poet worked all that evening on his poem; first to forget the strange tale of Bertroux, and second because he felt that he could not rest until he had completed his epic. In the back of his mind was a puzzling suspicion that he must work fast, that matters were coming to a head in such a fashion as to demand haste.

He was exhausted by daybreak, and somehow thankful that his tired sleep would be dreamless. He wanted to be free of that flame-haired image that haunted him by night, free to forget his terrible bondage to a wax woman.

He slept deeply as the sun crept from window to window of his attic room. When he arose it was with the prescience that noontide had passed, though by this time the sunlight had gradually faded into a mist of yellow fog that grew ever thicker beyond the window-panes.

Glancing at his watch he was startled to note that it was already long past three o'clock.

Where was the colonel? Bertrand was confident that his *concierge* would have awakened him with racket to spare should he have a daytime visitor. No, the colonel had not come. And that meant only one thing. He had been called, lured. Bertrand jumped up, raced to the door.

Hastily he crammed the finished manuscript of his poem into the ulster he donned against the encroaching fog. He took the stairs hastily, then rushed out along the dismal, fog-drowned streets.

This was like that first day, a month ago. And still he was running to the museum to keep his inevitable tryst with torment.

The very movement seemed to make him forgetful of his real errand, the finding of the colonel. Instead he could think only of *her* as he rushed through the gray fog to the gray room, the gray man, and the scarlet glory of her hair. . . .

The building loomed out of the mounting mists ahead. He hurried down the stairs, entered. The place was deserted, the little doorkeeper gone. A strange surmise rose in Bertrand's heart, but it receded before an irresistible urge to commune once more with Salome.

The air was tense with a feeling of impending fury, as though the crystallization of some cosmic dread was near. The murderers leered waxenly within as he paced down the hall. No Bertroux.

Deserted in the darkness, he stood alone before her. Never had she seemed so radiant as today. In the half-light she wavered, slitted eyes shining with wild invitation to forbidden rhapsodies. Her lips hungered.

Bertrand leaned forward, staring into that inscrutable, agelessly evil face. Something about her knowing smile of appeasement caused him to glance down —to glance at the silver salver that held the head of John the Baptist. Staring, still, wide-eyed it gaped.

The head of *Colonel Bertroux!*

6

THEN he knew as he glanced at the mocking smile of anguish, glanced at the blood flooding forth from the slashed neck. *Realistic art!* The first head a month ago, the second last week, and now the colonel, who felt the flooding desire to return. Young men forever coming to worship her beauty—newspaper accounts of decapitation tragedies. The beauty of a murderess unveiled in a deserted wax museum—she who had beheaded her lovers for witchery. *How often was that head changed?*

The little gray man crouched at his back, his eyes filled with leaden fire. His hand held a surgeon's knife. He smiled—at *her*. And he mumbled.

"Why not? You love her. I love her. She was not like a mortal woman—she was a witch. Yes, she killed when she lived, she liked the blood of men and the sight of eyes forever fixed in worship of her beauty. We worshipped together her mistress Hecate. Then they guillotined her. And so—I stole the body to model this image. I became her priest. Men come and they desire her, and to them I bring the gift I bring to you. Because they love her, I give them what I can—the chance to rest their tortured heads within her hands. Wax hands, perhaps, but her spirit is near. They all feel her spirit, and that is why they come and adore. Her spirit talks to me at night and asks me to bring new lovers. We have traveled together many years, she and I, and now we have returned to Paris for new adorers. They must lie in her hands, bleeding and bright, and stare their stare of love forever into her face. When she tries, I give her a new admirer.

"The colonel came this morning, and when I told him that which I tell you, he consented. They all do. And you shall consent, my friend; I know you will. Think of it: to lie within her pale white hands and stare forever; to die with the benediction of her beauty in your eyes! You will make the sacrifice, won't you? No one will know; they never suspect. You will play John the Baptist? You want me to, now, don't you? You want me to——"

Hypnosis. Hypnosis at the last. Bertrand tried to move as the voice droned, the eyes stared in glorious pleading from above.

And the cold edge of the knife caressed his throat. The blade began to bite. He heard words through the gray fog, through the scarlet fog as he stared into *her* face. She was a witch, a Medusa—to lie within her arms and worship as others had worshipped! A poet's death? In a moment his head would be resting on the salver and he could see her as he sank into the dark. He could never possess her—why live on? Why not die and know her radiance forever? It was easy, her husband knew and he was being kind to Bertrand. Kind. The knife bit.

Bertrand's hand went up. A sudden horror flickered in his soul. He grappled with the screaming little madman and the blade clattered to the floor. They fell in a lashing embrace, as Bertrand tore at the pudgy gray face, clawed deeply in the blazing eyes of the maniac.

Murderer! Wizard! Madman!

Something deep within him had risen in resurrection. Youth—sanity—the will to live. His fingers pressed as he shoved the gray man's head against the floor. He squeezed, throttled, until time dissolved in the welter of red anger. When his hands finally loosened, the little maniac lay quite still and dead.

BERTRAND rose and faced his impassive goddess. Her smile was unchanged. He looked again into her infernal beauty and his soul wavered once more. Then his hands fumbled at the breast of his ulster and he gained courage.

He drew forth the crumpled manuscript that lay there—his finished poem to Salome.

He found matches.

He lit the manuscript. It flamed as he held it forth, held it to her flaming hair. Fire mingled with fire as she continued to stare in the way Bertrand could not yet understand; the terrible way that enchanted him and all men and lured them to doom.

Impulse seized him even at the last. He took Salome in his arms—took her in his arms as she burned, writhing and moving with fiery life. He held her close for a moment as the glowing flames spread, then eased her again to the stand. She was burning horribly fast.

Witches must burn. . . .

And like a witch, her dying features changed. They melted into a hideous mass—her face became a gargoyle horror, a melting, shapeless yellow blob from which two glassy eyes fell like blue tears. Her body wriggled in agony as wax limbs sloughed. She was real then—real, and tortured. Tortured, just as Bertrand was as he beheld her waxen agonies. Tortured by fire; but a fire that purified.

Then it was all over. Bertrand stared at the man on the floor; still and dead he lay as the fire began creeping redly against the fog. It would soon blot the museum out forever; blot out the horror that lured men to a tragic re-enactment of an ancient crime. Fire purified.

Bertrand stared again at the little pile of melted yellow liquid that lay bubbling and seething as though in some hasty process of putrefaction. He stared, and then he prayed that the fire would mount swiftly. For now, with a gasp of horror, he understood, knew the mystery of her allure which had eluded him.

The maniac murderer on the floor—he had fashioned the statue from the morgue-procured body of his wife. This he had told Bertrand. But now Bertrand saw more; knew and guessed the secret of the statue's evil power. There is a miasma of evil about the dead body of a witch. . . .

Bertrand turned and ran sobbing from the redly ravaged room, ran sobbing from the sight of that yellow, bubbling pile of melted wax from which protruded the *charred, bony skeleton of a woman that had served as the statue's frame.*

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Hence, loathèd Melancholy,
Of Cerberus and blackest Midnight born
In Stygian cave forlorn,
'Mongst horrid shapes and shrieks and sights unholy!
—Milton: *L'Allegro.*

Medusa's Coil

By Z. B. BISHOP

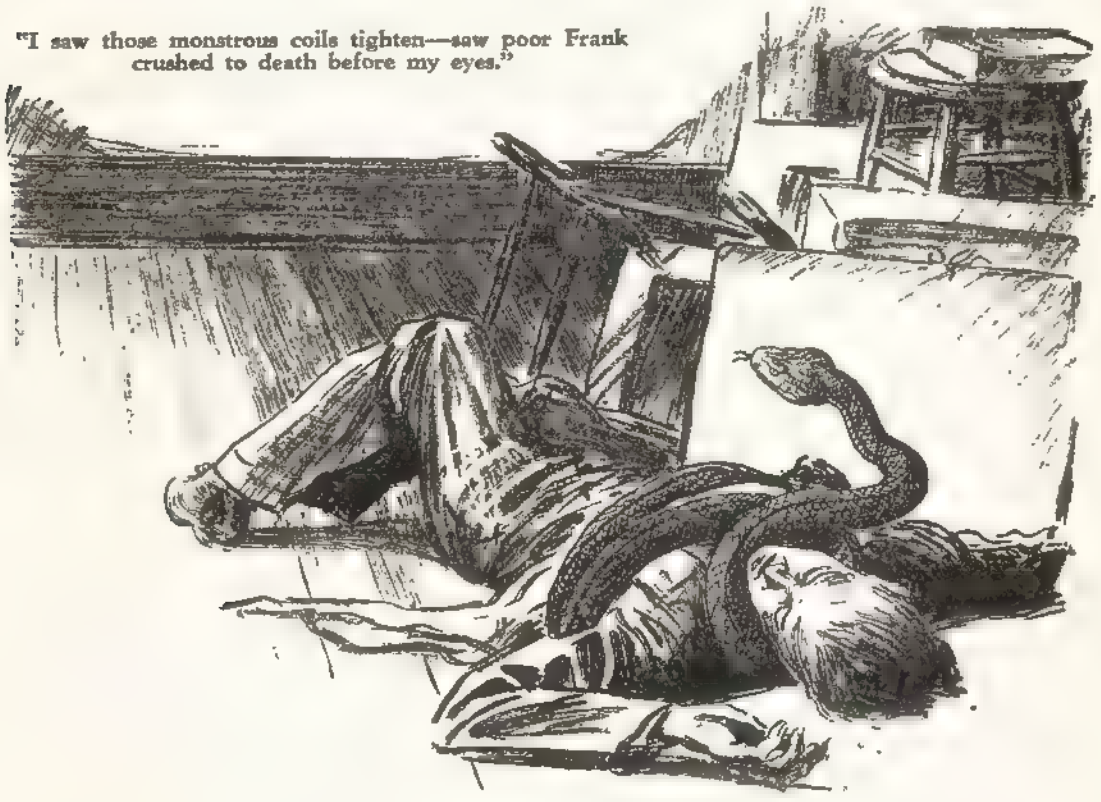
A powerful and compelling tale of brooding horror that deepens and broadens to the final catastrophe—an unusual and engrossing novelette by the author of "The Curse of Yig"

THE drive toward Cape Girardeau had been through unfamiliar country; and as the late afternoon light grew golden and half dream-like I realized that I must have directions if I expected to reach the town before night. I did not care to be wandering about these bleak south-

ern Missouri lowlands after dark, for roads were poor and the November cold rather formidable in an open roadster. Black clouds, too, were massing on the horizon; so I looked about among the long gray and blue shadows that streaked the flat, brownish fields, hoping to glimpse some house where I might get the needed information.

It was a lonely and deserted country, but at last I spied a roof among a clump of trees near the small river on my right; perhaps a full half-mile from the road, and probably reachable by some path or drive upon which I would presently come. In the absence of any nearer dwelling, I resolved to try my luck there; and was glad when the bushes by the roadside revealed the ruin of a carved stone gateway, covered with dry, dead vines and choked with undergrowth which explained why I had not been able to trace the path across the fields in my first distant view. I saw that I could not drive the car in; so I parked it very carefully near the gate—where a thick evergreen would shield it in case of rain—and got out for the long walk to the house.

Traversing that brush-grown path in the gathering twilight I was conscious of a distinct sense of foreboding, probably induced by the air of sinister decay hovering about the gate and the former driveway. From the carvings on the old stone pillars I inferred that this place was once an estate of manorial dignity; and I could clearly see that the driveway had originally boasted guardian lines of linden trees, some of which had died, while others had lost their special identity among



"I saw those monstrous coils tighten—saw poor Frank crushed to death before my eyes."

the wild scrub growths of the region.

As I plowed onward, cockleburrs and stickers clung to my clothes, and I began to wonder whether the place could be inhabited after all. Was I tramping on a vain errand? For a moment I was tempted to go back and try some farm farther along the road, when a view of the house ahead aroused my curiosity and stimulated my venturesome spirit.

There was something provocatively fascinating in the tree-girt, decrepit pile before me, for it spoke of the graces and spaciousness of a bygone era and a far more southerly environment. It was a typical wooden plantation house of the classic, early Nineteenth Century pattern, with two and a half stories and a great Ionic portico whose pillars reached up as far as the attic and supported a triangular pediment. Its state of decay was extreme and obvious: one of the vast columns having rotted and fallen to the ground, while the upper piazza or balcony had sagged dangerously low. Other buildings, I judged, had formerly stood near it.

As I mounted the broad stone steps to the low porch and the carved and four-lighted doorway I felt distinctly nervous, and started to light a cigarette —desisting when I saw how dry and inflammable everything about me was. Though now convinced that the house was deserted, I nevertheless hesitated to violate its dignity without knocking; so I tugged at the rusty iron knocker until I could get it to move, and finally set up a cautious rapping which seemed to make the whole place shake and rattle. There was no response; yet once more I plied the cumbrous, creaking device, as much to dispel the sense of unholy silence and solitude as to arouse any possible occupant of the ruin.

Somewhere near the river I heard the mournful note of a dove, and it seemed as if the coursing water itself were faintly audible. Half in a dream, I seized and rattled the ancient latch, and finally gave the great six-paneled door a frank trying. It was unlocked, as I could see in a moment; and though it stuck and grated on its hinges I began to push it open, stepping through it into a vast shadowy hall as I did so.

But the moment I took this step I regretted it. It was not that a legion of specters confronted me in that dim and dusty hall with the ghostly Empire furniture, but that I knew at once that the place was not deserted after all. There was a creaking on the great curved staircase, and the sound of faltering footsteps slowly descending. Then I saw a tall, bent figure silhouetted for an instant against the great Palladian window on the landing.

MY FIRST terror was soon over, and as the figure descended the final flight I was ready to greet the householder whose privacy I had invaded. In the semi-darkness I could see him reach into his pocket for a match. There came a flare as he lighted a small kerosene lamp which stood on a rickety console table near the foot of the stairs. The feeble glow revealed the stooping figure of a very tall, emaciated old man, disordered in dress and unshaven as to face, yet for all that with the bearing and expression of a gentleman.

I did not wait for him to speak, but at once began to explain my presence.

"You'll pardon my coming in like this, but when my knocking didn't raise anybody I concluded that no one lived here. I wanted to know the shortest road to Cape Girardeau. I wanted to get there before dark, but now, of course——"

As I paused, the man spoke, in exactly the cultivated tone I had expected, and with a mellow accent as unmistakably Southern as the house he inhabited.

"Rather, you must pardon me for not answering your knock more promptly. I live in a very retired way, and am not usually expecting visitors. At first I thought you were a mere curiosity-seeker. When you knocked again I started to answer, but I am not well and have to move very slowly, owing to spinal neuritis—very troublesome case.

"As for your getting to town before dark—you can't do that. The road you are on isn't the best or shortest way. What you must do is to take the first real road to your left after you leave the gate. There are three or four cart-paths you can ignore, but you can't mistake the real road because of the large willow tree on the right just opposite it.

"When once you've turned, keep on past two roads and turn to the right along the third. After that——"

Perplexed by these elaborate directions, confusing indeed to a total stranger, I could not help interrupting.

"Please, how can I follow all these clues in pitch-darkness, without ever having been near here before, and with only an indifferent pair of headlights to tell me what is and what isn't a road? Besides, I think it's going to storm pretty soon, and my car is an open one. It looks as if I were in a bad fix if I want to get to Cape Girardeau tonight. The fact is, I don't think I'd better try. I don't like to impose, but in view of the circumstances, do you suppose you could put me up for the night? I won't be any trouble. Just let me have a corner to sleep in till daylight, and I'm all right. I can leave the car in the road where it is; wet weather won't hurt it."

As I made my sudden request I could see the old man's face lose its former expression of quiet resignation and take on an odd, surprised look.

"Sleep *here?*"

He seemed so astonished at my request that I repeated it.

"Yes, why not? I assure you I won't be any trouble. What else can I do? I'm a stranger hereabouts, these roads are a labyrinth in the dark, and I'll wager it'll be raining torrents inside of an hour——"

This time it was my host's turn to interrupt, and as he did so I could feel a peculiar quality in his deep, musical voice.

"A stranger—of course you must be, else you wouldn't think of sleeping here; wouldn't think of coming here at all. People don't come here nowadays."

He paused, and my desire to stay was increased a thousandfold by the sense of mystery his laconic words seemed to evoke. There was something queer about this place, and the pervasive musty smell seemed to cloak a thousand secrets. Again I noticed the extreme decrepitude of everything about me; manifest even in the feeble rays of the single small lamp. I felt woefully chilly, and saw with regret that no heating seemed to be provided; yet so great was my curiosity that I still wished most ardently to stay and learn something of the recluse and his dismal abode.

"You may stay if you really wish to; *you* can come to no harm that I know of. Others claim there are certain peculiarly undesirable influences here. As for me, I stay because I have to."

With my curiosity still more heightened, I prepared to take my host at

his word, and followed him slowly upstairs when he motioned me to do so. It was very dark now, and faint pattering outside told me that the threatened rain had come. I would have been glad of any shelter, but this was doubly welcome because of the hints of mystery about the place and its master. For an incurable lover of the grotesque, no more fitting haven could have been provided.

THERE was a second-floor corner room in less unkempt shape than the rest of the house, and into this my host led me, setting down his small lamp and lighting a somewhat larger one. From the cleanliness and contents of the room, and from the books ranged along the walls, I could see that I had not guessed amiss in thinking the man a gentleman of taste and breeding. He was a hermit and eccentric, no doubt, but still had standards and intellectual interests. As he waved me to a seat I began a conversation on general topics, and was pleased to find him not at all taciturn. If anything, he seemed glad of someone to talk to, and did not attempt to swerve the discourse from personal topics.

He was, I learned, one Antoine de Russy, of an ancient, powerful and cultivated line of Louisiana planters. More than a century ago his grandfather, a younger son, had migrated to southern Missouri and founded a new estate in the lavish ancestral manner; building this pillared mansion and surrounding it with all the accessories of a great plantation. There had been, at one time, as many as two hundred negroes in the cabins which stood on the flat ground in the rear—ground that the river had now invaded—and to hear them singing and laughing and playing the banjo at night was to know the fullest charm of a civilization and social order now sadly extinct. In front of the house, where the great guardian oaks and willows stood, there had been a lawn like a broad green carpet, always watered and trimmed and with flagstoned, flower-bordered walks curving through it. Riverside (for such the place was called) had been a lovely and idyllic homestead in its day; and my host could recall it when many traces of its best period still lingered.

It was raining hard now, with dense sheets of water beating against the insecure roof, walls, and windows, and sending in drops through a thousand chinks and crevices. Moisture trickled down to the floor from unsuspected places, and the mounting wind rattled the rotting, loose-hinged shutters outside. But I minded none of this, nor even thought of my roadster outside beneath the trees, for I saw that a story was coming. Incited to reminiscence, my host made a move to show me to sleeping-quarters, but kept on recalling older, better days. Soon, I saw, I might learn why he lived alone in that ancient place, and why his neighbors thought it full of undesirable influences. His voice was very musical as he spoke on, and his tale soon took a turn which left me no chance to grow drowsy.

"Yes, Riverside was built in 1816, and my father was born here in 1828. He died young, so young I can just barely remember him. In '64, he was killed in the war—Seventh Louisiana Infantry, C.S.A.—for he went back to the old home to enlist. My grandfather was too old to fight, yet he lived on to be ninety-five, and helped my mother bring me up: good bringing-up, too, I'll give them credit. We always had strong traditions, high notions of honor, and my grandfather saw to it that I grew up the way de Russys have

grown up, generation after generation, ever since the Crusades. We weren't quite wiped out financially, and managed to get on very comfortably after the war. I went to a good school in Louisiana, and later to Princeton. Later on I was able to get the plantation on a fairly profitable basis, though you see what it's come to now.

"My mother died when I was twenty, and my grandfather two years later. It was rather lonely after that; and in '85 I married a distant cousin in New Orleans. Things might have been different if she'd lived, but she died when my son Denis was born. Then I had only Denis. I didn't try marriage again, but gave all my time to the boy. He was like me, like all the de Russys, darkish and tall and thin, and with the devil of a temper. I gave him the same training my grandfather had given me, but he didn't need much training when it came to points of honor. It was in him. Never saw such high spirit—all I could do to keep him from running away to the Spanish War when he was eleven! Romantic young devil, too full of high notions—you'd call 'em Victorian, now—no trouble at all to make him let the nigger wenches alone. I sent him to the same school I'd gone to, and to Princeton, too. He was Class of 1909.

"In the end he decided to be a doctor, and went a year to the Harvard Medical School. Then he hit on the idea of keeping to the old French tradition of the family, and argued me into sending him to the Sorbonne. I did—and proudly enough, though I knew how lonely I'd be with him so far off. Would to God I hadn't! I thought he was the safest kind of a boy to be in Paris. He had a room in the Rue St. Jacques—that's near the University in the Latin Quarter—but according to his letters and his friends he didn't cut up with the gayer dogs at all. The people he knew were mostly young fellows from home—serious students and artists who thought more of their work than of striking attitudes and painting the town red.

"But of course there were lots of fellows who were on a sort of dividing line between serious study and the devil: the esthetes, the decadents, experimenters in life and sensation; the Baudelaire kind of a chap. Naturally, Denis ran up against a good many of these, and saw a good deal of their life. They had all sorts of crazy circles and cults — imitation devil-worship, false Black Masses, and the like. Doubt if it did them much harm on the whole—probably most of 'em forgot all about it in a year or two. One of the deepest in this queer stuff was a fellow Denis had known at school—for that matter, whose father I'd known myself. Frank Marsh, of New Orleans. Disciple of Lafcadio Hearn and Gauguin and Van Gogh—regular epitome of the yellow nineties. Poor devil—he had the makings of a great artist, at that.

"MARSH was the oldest friend Denis had in Paris; so as a matter of course they saw a good deal of each other, to talk over old times at St. Clair Academy, and all that. The boy wrote me a good deal about him, and I didn't see any especial harm when he spoke of the group of mystics Marsh ran with. It seems there was some cult of prehistoric Egyptian and Carthaginian magic having a rage among the Bohemian element on the left bank; some nonsensical thing that pretended to reach back to forgotten sources of hidden truth in lost African civilizations —the great Zimbabwe, and dead Atlantean cities in the Hoggar region of

the Sahara—and that had a lot of gibberish connected with snakes and human hair. At least, I called it gibberish then. Denis used to quote Marsh as saying odd things about the veiled facts behind the legend of Medusa's snaky locks—and behind the later Ptolemaic myth of Berenice, who offered up her hair to save her husband-brother, and had it set in the sky as the constellation Coma Berenices.

"I don't think this business made much impression on Denis until the night of the queer ritual at Marsh's rooms when he met the priestess. Most of the devotees of this cult were young fellows, but the head of it was a young woman who called herself *Tanit-Isis,* letting it be know that her real name—her name in this latest incarnation, as she put it—was Marceline Bedard. She claimed to be the left-handed daughter of Marquis de Chameaux, and seemed to have been both a petty artist and an artist's model before adopting this more lucrative magical profession. Someone said she had lived for a time in the West Indies—Martinique, I think—but she was very reticent about herself. Part of her pose was a great show of austerity and holiness, but I don't think the more experienced students took that very seriously.

"Denis, though, was far from experienced, and wrote me fully ten pages of slush about the goddess he had discovered. If I'd only realized his simplicity I might have done something, but I never thought a puppy infatuation like that could mean much. I felt absurdly sure that Denis' touchy personal honor and family pride would always keep him out of the most serious complications.

"As time went on, though, his letters began to make me nervous. He mentioned this Marceline more and more, and his friends less and less; and began talking about the 'cruel and silly way' they declined to introduce her to their mothers and sisters. He seems to have asked her no questions about herself, and I don't doubt but that she filled him full of romantic legendry concerning her origin and divine revelations and the way people slighted her. At length I could see that Denis was altogether cutting his own crowd and spending the bulk of his time with this alluring priestess. At her especial request he never told the old crowd of their continual meetings; so nobody over there tried to break the affair up.

"I suppose she thought he was fabulously rich; for he had the air of a patrician, and people of a certain class think all aristocratic Americans are wealthy. In any case, she probably thought this a rare chance to contract a genuine right-handed alliance with a really eligible young man. By the time my nervousness burst into open advice, it was too late. The boy had lawfully married her, and wrote that he was dropping his studies and bringing the woman to Riverside. He said she had made a great sacrifice and resigned her leadership of the magical cult, and that henceforth she would be merely a private gentlewoman—the future mistress of Riverside, and mother of de Russys to come.

"Well, sir, I took it the best way I could. I knew that sophisticated Continentals have different standards from our old American ones, and anyway, I really knew nothing against the woman. A charlatan, perhaps, but why necessarily any worse? I suppose I tried to keep as naïve as possible about such things in those days, for the boy's sake. Clearly, there was nothing for a man of sense to do but to let Denis alone so long as his new wife conformed to de

Russy ways. Let her have a chance to prove herself—perhaps she wouldn't hurt the family as much as some might fear. So I didn't raise any objections or ask any penitence. The thing was done, and I stood ready to welcome the boy back, whatever he brought with him.

"THEY got here three weeks after the telegram telling of the marriage. Marceline was beautiful, and I could see how the boy might very well get foolish about her. She did have an air of breeding, and I think to this day she must have had some strain of good blood in her. She was apparently not much over twenty; of medium size, fairly slim, and as graceful as a tigress in posture and motions. Her complexion was a deep olive, and her eyes were large and very dark. She had small, classically regular features, though not quite clean-cut enough to suit my taste, and the most singular head of jet-black hair that I ever saw.

"I didn't wonder that she had dragged the subject of hair into her magical cult, for with that heavy profusion of it the idea must have occurred to her naturally. Coiled up, it made her look like some Oriental princess in a drawing of Aubrey Beardsley's. Hanging down her back, it came well below her knees and shone in the light as if it possessed some separate, unholy vitality of its own. I would almost have thought of Medusa or Berenice myself without having such things suggested to me, upon seeing and studying that hair.

"Sometimes I thought it moved slightly of itself, and tended to arrange itself in distinct ropes or strands, but this may have been sheer illusion. She brushed it incessantly, and seemed to use some sort of preparation on it. I got the notion once, a curious, whimsical notion, that it was a living thing which she had to feed in some strange way. All nonsense—but it added to my feeling of constraint about her and her hair.

"For I can't deny that I failed to like her wholly, no matter how hard I tried. Something about her repelled me subtly, and I could not help weaving morbid and macabre associations about everything connected with her. Her complexion called up thoughts of Babylon, Atlantis, Lemuria, and the terrible forgotten dominations of an elder world; her eyes struck me sometimes as the eyes of some unholy forest creature or animal-goddess too immeasurably ancient to be fully human; and her hair—that dense, exotic, overnourished growth of oily jet—made one shiver as a great black python might have done. There was no doubt but that she realized my involuntary attitude, though I tried to hide it, and she tried to hide the fact that she noticed it.

"Yet the boy's infatuation lasted. He positively fawned on her, and overdid all the little gallantries of daily life to a sickening degree. She appeared to return the feeling, though I could see it took a conscious effort to make her duplicate his enthusiasms and extravagances. For one thing, I think she was piqued to learn that we weren't as wealthy as she had expected.

"It was a bad business all told. I could see that sad undercurrents were arising. Denis was half hypnotized with puppy-love, and began to grow away from me as he felt my shrinking from his wife. This kind of thing went on for months, and I saw that I was losing my only son, the boy who had formed the center of all my thoughts and acts for the past quarter of a century.

"Marceline seemed to be a good wife

enough in those early months, and our friends received her without any quibbling or questioning. I was always nervous, though, about what some of the young fellows in Paris might write home to their relatives after the news of the marriage spread around. Despite the woman's love of secrecy, it couldn't remain hidden forever; indeed Denis had written a few of his closest friends, in strict confidence, as soon as he was settled with her at Riverside.

"I got to staying more and more alone in my room with my failing health as an excuse. It was about that time that my present spinal neuritis began to develop. Denis didn't seem to notice the trouble, or take any interest in me and my habits and affairs; and it hurt me to see how callous he was getting. I began to get sleepless, and often racked my brain in the night to try to find out what really was the matter—what it really was that made my new daughter-in-law so repulsive and even dimly horrible to me.

"Oddly, the only ones who seemed to share my uneasiness were the servants. The darkies around the house seemed very sullen in their attitude toward her, and in a few weeks all save the few who were strongly attached to our family had left. These few—old Scipio and his wife Sarah, the cook Delilah, and Mary, Scipio's daughter, were as civil as possible, but plainly revealed that their new mistress commanded their duty rather than their affection. They stayed in their own remote part of the house as much as possible. McCabe, our white chauffeur, was insolently admiring rather than hostile; and another exception was a very old Zulu woman, said to have come from Africa over a hundred years before, who had been a sort of leader in her small cabin as a kind of family pensioner. Old Sophonisba always showed reverence whenever Marceline came near her, and one time I saw her kiss the ground where her mistress had walked. Blacks are superstitious animals, and I wondered whether Marceline had been talking any of her mystical nonsense to our hands in order to overcome their evident dislike.

"Well, that's how we went on for nearly half a year. Then, in the summer of 1916, things began to happen. Toward the middle of June Denis got a note from his old friend Frank Marsh, telling of a sort of nervous breakdown which made him want to take a rest in the country. It was postmarked New Orleans, for Marsh had gone home from Paris when he felt the collapse coming on, and seemed a very plain though polite bid for an invitation from us. Marsh, of course, knew that Marceline was here, and asked very courteously after her. Denis was sorry to hear of his trouble and told him at once to come along for an indefinite visit.

"MARSH came, and I was shocked to notice how he had changed since I had seen him in his earlier days. He was a smallish, lightish fellow, with blue eyes and an undecided chin; and now I could see the effects of drink and I don't know what else in his puffy eyelids, enlarged nose-pores, and heavy lines around the mouth. I reckon he had taken his pose of decadence pretty seriously, and set out to be as much of a Rimbaud, Baudelaire, or Lautremont as he could. And yet he was delightful to talk to, for like all decadents he was exquisitely sensitive to the color and atmosphere and names of things; admirably, thoroughly alive, and with whole records of conscious experience in obscure, shadowy fields of living and feel-

ing which most of us pass over without knowing they exist.

"I was glad of the visit, for I felt it would help to set up a normal atmosphere in the house again. And that's what it really seemed to do at first; for, as I said, Marsh was a delight to have around. He was as sincere and profound an artist as I ever saw in my life, and I certainly believe that nothing on earth mattered to him except the perception and expression of beauty. When he saw an exquisite thing, or was creating one, his eyes would dilate until the light irises went nearly out of sight, leaving two mystical black pits in that weak, delicate, chalk-like face; black pits opening on strange worlds which none of us could guess about.

"When he reached here, though, he didn't have any chances to show this tendency; for he had (as he told Denis) gone quite stale. It seems he had been very successful as an artist of a bizarre kind—like Fuseli or Goya or Sime or Clark Ashton Smith—but had suddenly become played out. The world of ordinary things around him had ceased to hold anything he could recognize as beauty of enough force and poignancy to arouse his creative faculty. He had often been this way before, but this time he could not invent any new, strange, or outré sensation or experience which would supply the needed illusion of fresh beauty or stimulating adventurous expectancy. He was like a Durtal or a des Esseintes at the most jaded point of his curious orbit.

"Marceline was away when Marsh arrived. She hadn't been enthusiastic about his coming, and had refused to decline an invitation from some of our friends in St. Louis which came about that time for her and Denis. Denis, of course, stayed to receive his guest, but Marceline had gone on alone. It was the first time they had ever been separated, and I hoped the interval would help dispel the sort of daze that was making such a fool of the boy. Marceline showed no hurry to get back, but seemed to me to prolong her absence as much as she could. Denis stood it better than one would have expected from such a doting husband, and seemed more like his old self as he talked over other days with Marsh and tried to cheer the listless esthete up.

"It was Marsh who seemed most impatient to see the woman; perhaps because he thought her strange beauty, or some phase of the mysticism which had gone into her one-time magical cult, might help to reawaken his interest in things and give him another start toward artistic creation. That there was no baser reason, I was absolutely certain from what I knew of Marsh's character. With all his weaknesses, he was a gentleman, and it had indeed relieved me when I first learned that he wanted to come here because his willingness to accept Denis' hospitality proved that there was no reason why he shouldn't.

"When, at last, Marceline did return, I could see that Marsh was tremendously affected. He did not attempt to make her talk of the bizarre thing which she had so definitely abandoned, but was unable to hide a powerful admiration which kept his eyes—now dilated in that curious way for the first time during his visit—riveted to her every moment she was in the room. She, however, seemed uneasy rather than pleased by his steady scrutiny; that is, she seemed so at first, though this feeling of hers wore away in a few days, and left the two on a basis of the most cordial and voluble congeniality. I could see Marsh studying her constantly when he thought no

one was watching, and I wondered how long it would be that only the artist, and not the primitive man, would be aroused by her mysterious graces.

"Denis naturally felt some irritation at this turn of affairs; though he realized that his guest was a man of honor and that, as kindred mystics and esthetes, Marceline and Marsh would naturally have things and interests to discuss in which a more or less conventional person could have no part. He didn't hold anything against anybody, but merely regretted that his own imagination was too limited and traditional to let him talk with Marceline as Marsh talked. At this stage of things I began to see more of the boy. With his wife otherwise busy, he had time to remember that he had a father, who was ready to help him in any difficulty.

"We often sat together on the veranda watching Marsh and Marceline as they rode up or down the drive on horseback, or played tennis on the court that used to stretch south of the house. They talked mostly in French, which Marsh, though he hadn't more than a quarter-portion of French blood, handled more glibly than either Denis or I could speak it. Marceline's English, always academically correct, was rapidly improving in accent; but it was plain that she relished dropping back into her mother-tongue. As we looked at the congenial couple they made, I could see the boy's cheek and throat muscles tighten; though he wasn't a whit less ideal a host to Marsh, or a whit less considerate a husband to Marceline.

"All this was generally in the afternoon; for Marceline rose very late, had breakfast in bed, and took an immense amount of time preparing to come downstairs. It was in these morning hours that Denis and Marsh did their real visiting, and exchanged the close confidences which kept their friendship up despite the strain that jealousy imposed.

"WELL, it was in one of those morning talks on the veranda that Marsh made the proposition which brought on the end. I was laid up, but had managed to get downstairs and stretch out on the front parlor sofa near the long window. Denis and Marsh were just outside; so I couldn't help hearing all they said. They had been talking about art, and the curious, capricious environmental elements needed to jolt an artist into producing work of merit, when Marsh suddenly swerved from abstractions to the personal application he must have had in mind from the start.

" 'I suppose,' he was saying, 'that nobody can tell just what it is in some scenes or objects that makes them esthetic stimuli for certain individuals. Basically, of course, it must have some reference to each man's background of stored-up mental associations; for no two people have the same scale of sensitiveness and responses. For some of us all ordinary things have ceased to have any emotional or imaginative significance, but no one responds in the same way to exactly the same extraordinary thing. Now take me, for instance. . . .

" 'I know, Denny, that I can say these things to you because you have such a preternaturally unspoiled mind—clean, objective, and all that. You won't misunderstand. The fact is, I think I know what's needed to set my imagination working again. I've had a dim idea of it ever since we were in Paris, but I'm sure now. It's Marceline, old chap; that face and that hair, and the train of shadowy images they bring up. Not

merely visible beauty—though God knows there's enough of that — but something peculiar and individualized, that can't exactly be explained. Do you know, in the last few days I've felt the existence of such a stimulus so keenly that I honestly think I could outdo myself, if I could get hold of paint and canvas at just the time when her face and hair set my fancy stirring and weaving.

" 'There is something weird and other-worldly about it, something joined up with the dim ancient thing Marceline represents. I don't know how much she's told you about that side of her, but I can assure you there's plenty to it. She has some marvelous links with the outside.'

"Some change in Denis' expression must have halted the speaker here, for there was a considerable spell of silence before the words went on. I was utterly taken aback, for I'd expected no such overt development as this, and I wondered what my son could be thinking. My heart began to pound violently, and I strained my ears in the frankest of intentional eavesdropping. Then Marsh resumed.

" 'Of course you're jealous—I know how a speech like mine must sound—but I can swear to you that you needn't be.'

"Denis did not answer, and Marsh went on.

" 'To tell the truth, I could never be in love with Marceline — I couldn't even be a cordial friend of hers in the warmest sense. Why, damn it all, I feel like a hypocrite talking with her these days as I've been doing.

" 'The case simply is, that one phase of her half hypnotizes me in a certain way — a very strange, fantastic, and dimly terrible way — just as another phase half hypnotizes you in a much more normal way. I see something in her—or to be psychologically exact, something through her or beyond her—that you don't see at all; something that brings up a vast pageantry of shapes from forgotten abysses, and makes me want to paint incredible things whose outlines vanish the instant I try to envisage them clearly. Don't mistake, Denny: your wife is a magnificent being, a splendid focus of cosmic forces who has a right to be called divine if anything on earth has!'

"I felt a clearing of the situation at this point, for the abstract strangeness of Marsh's expressed sentiment, plus the flattery he was now heaping on Marceline, could not fail to disarm and mollify one as fondly proud of his consort as Denis always was. Marsh evidently caught the change himself, for there was more confidence in his tone as he continued.

" 'I must paint her, Denny, must paint that hair, and you won't regret it. There's something more than mortal about that hair, something more than beautiful——'

"He paused, and I wondered what Denis could be thinking. Was Marsh's interest actually that of the artist alone, or was he merely infatuated as Denis had been? I had thought, in their school days, that he had envied my boy, and I dimly felt that it might be the same now. On the other hand, something in that talk of artistic stimulus had rung amazingly true; so that the more I pondered, the more I was inclined to take the stuff at face value. Denis seemed to do so, too, for although I could not catch his low-spoken reply, I could tell by the effect it produced that it must have been affirmative.

"There was a sound of someone slapping another on the back, and then a

grateful speech from Marsh that I was long to remember.

" 'That's great, Denny; and just as I told you, you'll never regret it. In a sense, I'm half doing it for you. You'll be a different man when you see it. It'll put you back where you used to be—give you a waking-up and a sort of salvation—but you can't see what I mean as yet. Just remember old friendship, and don't get the idea that I'm not the same old bird!'

"I ROSE perplexedly as I saw the two stroll off across the lawn, arm in arm. What could Marsh have meant by his strange and almost ominous reassurance? The more my fears were quieted in one direction, the more they were aroused in another. Look at it in any way I could, it seemed to be rather a bad business.

"But matters got started just the same. Denis fixed up an attic room with skylights, and Marsh sent for all sorts of painting equipment. Everyone was rather excited about the new venture, and I was at least glad that something was on foot to break the brooding tension.

"Soon the sittings began, and we all took them quite seriously, for we could see that Marsh regarded them as important artistic events. Denny and I used to go quietly about the house as though something sacred were occurring.

"With Marceline, though, it was a different matter, as I began to see at once. Whatever Marsh's reactions to the sittings may have been, hers were painfully obvious. Every possible way she betrayed a frank and commonplace infatuation for the artist, and would repulse Denis' marks of affection whenever she dared. Oddly, I noticed this more vividly than Denis himself, and tried to devise some plan for keeping the boy's mind easy until the matter could be straightened out. There was no use in having him excited about it if it could be helped.

"In the end I decided that Denis had better be away while the disagreeable situation existed. I could represent his interests well enough at this end, and sooner or later Marsh would finish the picture and go. My view of Marsh's honor was such that I did not look for any worse developments. When the matter had blown over, and Marceline had forgotten about her new infatuation, it would be time enough to have Denis on hand again.

"So I wrote a long letter to my marketing and financial agent in New York, and cooked up a plan to have the boy summoned there for an indefinite time. I had the agent write him that our affairs absolutely required one of us to go East, and of course my illness made it clear that I could not be the one. It was arranged that when Denis got to New York he would find enough plausible matters to keep him busy as long as I thought he ought to be away.

"The plan worked perfectly, and Denis started for New York without the least suspicion. Marceline and Marsh went with him in the car to Cape Girardeau, where he caught the afternoon train to St. Louis. They returned about dark, and as McCabe drove the car back to the stables I could hear them talking on the veranda. This time I resolved to do some intentional eavesdropping, so quietly went down to the front parlor and stretched out on the sofa near the window.

"At first I could hear nothing, but very shortly there came a sound as of a chair being shifted, followed by a short, sharp breath and a sort of inarticulately hurt exclamation from Marceline.

Then I heard Marsh speaking in a strained, almost formal voice.

" 'I'd enjoy working tonight — if you're not too tired.'

"Marceline's reply was in the same hurt tone which had marked her exclamation. She used English, as he had done.

" 'Oh, Frank, is that really all you care about? Forever working! Can't we just sit out in this glorious moonlight?'

"He answered impatiently, his voice showing a certain contempt beneath the dominant quality of artistic enthusiasm.

" 'Moonlight! Good God, what cheap sentimentality! For a supposedly sophisticated person you surely do hang on to some of the crudest claptrap that ever escaped from the dime novels. With art at your elbow, you have to think of the moon! Or perhaps it makes you think of the Roodmus dance around the stone pillars at Auteuil; hell! how you used to make those goggle-eyed yaps stare! But no, I suppose you've dropped all that now. No more Atlantean magic or hair-snake rites for Madame de Russy! I'm the only one to remember the old things, the things that came down through the temples of Tanit and called on the ramparts of Zimbabwe. But I won't be cheated of that remembrance—all that is weaving itself into the thing on my canvas—the thing that is going to capture wonder and crystallize the secrets of seventy-five thousand years.'

"Marceline interrupted in a voice full of mixed emotions.

" 'It's you who are cheaply sentimental now! You know well that the old things had better be let alone. All of you had better look out if ever I chant the old rites or try to call up what lies hidden in Yuggoth, Zimbabwe, and Rl'yeh. I thought you had more sense!

" 'You lack logic. You want me to be interested in this precious painting of yours, yet you never let me see what you're doing. Always that black cloth over it! It's of me—I shouldn't think it would matter if I saw it.'

"Marsh was interrupting this time, his voice curiously hard and strained.

" 'No. Not now. You'll see it in due time. You say it's of you—yes, it's that, but it's more. If you knew, you mightn't be so impatient. Poor Denis! My God, it's a shame!'

"My throat went suddenly dry as the words rose to an almost febrile pitch. What could Marsh mean? Suddenly I saw that he had stopped and was entering the house alone. I heard the front door slam, and listened as his footsteps ascended the stairs. Outside on the veranda I could still hear Marceline's heavy, angry breathing. I crept away sick at heart, feeling that there were grave things to ferret out before I could safely let Denis come back.

"AFTER that evening the tension around the place was even worse than before. Marceline had always lived on flattery and fawning, and the shock of those few blunt words from Marsh was too much for her temperament.

"There was no living in the house with her any more, for with poor Denis gone she took out her abusiveness on everybody. When she could find no one indoors to quarrel with she would go out to Sophonisba's cabin and spend hours talking with the queer old Zulu woman. Aunt Sophy was the only person who would fawn abjectly enough to suit her, and when I tried once to overhear their conversation I found Marceline whispering about *elder secrets* and *unknown* Kadath while the Negress rocked to and fro in her chair,

making inarticulate sounds of reverence and admiration every now and then.

"But nothing could break her dog-like infatuation for Marsh. She would talk bitterly and sullenly to him, yet was getting more and more obedient to his wishes. It was very convenient for him, since he now became able to make her pose for the picture whenever he felt like painting. He tried to show gratitude for this willingness, but I thought I could detect a kind of contempt or even loathing beneath his careful politeness. For my part, I frankly hated Marceline! There was no use in calling my attitude anything as mild as mere dislike these days. Certainly, I was glad Denis was away. His letters, not nearly so frequent as I wished, showed signs of strain and worry.

"As the middle of August went by I gathered from Marsh's remarks that the portrait was nearly done. His mood seemed increasingly sardonic, though Marceline's temper improved a bit, as the prospect of seeing the thing tickled her vanity. I can still recall the day when Marsh said he'd have everything finished within a week. Marceline brightened up perceptibly, though not without a venomous look at me. It seemed as if her coiled hair visibly tightened about her head.

" 'I'm to be the first to see it!' she snapped. Then, smiling at Marsh, she added, "And if I don't like it I shall slash it to pieces!'

"Marsh's face took on the most curious look I had ever seen it wear as he answered her.

" 'I can't vouch for your taste, Marceline, but I swear it will be magnificent! Not that I want to take much credit—art creates itself—and this thing had to be done. Just wait!'

"During the next few days I felt a queer sense of foreboding, as if the completion of the picture meant a kind of catastrophe instead of a relief. Denis, too, had not written me, and my agent in New York said he was planning some trip to the country. I wondered what the outcome of the whole thing would be. What a queer mixture of elements—Marsh and Marceline, Denis and I! How would all these ultimately react on one another? When my fears grew too great I tried to lay them all to my infirmity, but that explanation never quite satisfied me.

"WELL, the thing exploded on Tuesday, the 26th of August. I had risen at my usual time and had breakfast, but was not good for much because of the pain in my spine. It had been troubling me badly of late, and forcing me to take opiates when it got too unbearable; nobody else was downstairs except the servants, though I could hear Marceline moving about in her room. Marsh slept in the attic next his studio, and had begun to keep such late hours that he was seldom up till noon. About ten o'clock the pain got the better of me, so that I took a double dose of my opiate and lay down on the parlor sofa. The last I heard was Marceline's pacing overhead. Poor creature—if I had known! She must have been walking before the long mirror admiring herself. That was like her—vain from start to finish, reveling in her own beauty, just as she reveled in all the little luxuries Denis was able to give her.

"I didn't wake up till near sunset, and knew instantly how long I had slept from the golden light and long shadows outside the window. Nobody was about, and a sort of unnatural stillness seemed to be hovering over everything. From afar, though, I thought I could sense a faint howling, wild and inter-

mittent, whose quality had a slight but baffling familiarity about it. I'm not much for psychic premonitions, but I was frightfully uneasy from the start. There had been dreams, even worse than the ones I had been dreaming in the weeks before; and this time they seemed hideously linked to some black and festering reality. The whole place had a poisonous air. Afterward I reflected that certain sounds must have filtered through to my unconscious brain during those hours of drugged sleep. My pain, though, was very much eased, and I rose and walked without difficulty.

"Soon enough I began to see that something was wrong. Marsh and Marceline might have been riding, but someone ought to have been getting dinner in the kitchen. Instead there was only silence, except for that faint distant howl or wail, and nobody answered when I pulled the old-fashioned bell-cord to summon Scipio. Then, chancing to look up, I saw the spreading stain on the ceiling—the bright red stain, that must have come through the floor of Marceline's room.

"In an instant I forgot my crippled back and hurried upstairs to find out the worst. Everything under the sun raced through my mind as I struggled with the dampness-warped door of that silent chamber, and most hideous of all was a terrible sense of malign fulfilment and fatal expectedness. I had, it struck me, known all along that nameless horrors were gathering; that something profoundly evil had gained a foothold under my roof from which only blood and tragedy could result.

"The door gave at last, and I stumbled into the large room beyond—all dim from the branches of the great trees outside the windows. For a moment I could do nothing but flinch at the faint evil odor that immediately struck my nostrils. Then, turning on the electric light and glancing around, I glimpsed a nameless blasphemy on the yellow and blue rug.

"It lay face down in a great pool of dark, thickened blood, and had the gory print of a shod human foot in the middle of its naked back. Blood was spattered everywhere—on the walls, furniture and floor. My knees gave way as I took in the sight, so that I had to stumble to a chair and slump down. The thing had obviously been a human being, though its identity was not easy to establish at first, since it was without clothes and had most of its hair hacked and torn from the scalp in a very crude way. It was of a deep ivory color, and I knew that it must have been Marceline. The shoeprint on the back made the thing seem all the more hellish. I could not even picture the strange, loathsome tragedy which must have taken place while I slept in the room below. When I raised my hand to wipe my dripping forehead I saw that my fingers were sticky with blood. I shuddered, then realized that it must have come from the knob of the door which the unknown murderer had forced shut behind him as he left. He had taken his weapon with him, it seemed, for no instrument of death was visible here.

"As I studied the floor I saw that a line of sticky footprints like the one on the body led away from the horror to the door. There was another blood-trail, too, and of a less easily explainable kind; a broadish, continuous line, as if marking the path of some huge snake. At first I concluded it must be due to something the murderer had dragged after him. Then, noting the way some of the footprints seemed to be superimposed on it, I was forced to believe that it had been there when the

murderer left. But what crawling entity could have been in that room with the victim and her assassin, leaving before the killer when the deed was done? As I asked myself this question, I thought I heard fresh bursts of that faint, distant wailing.

"Finally, rousing myself from a lethargy of horror, I got on my feet again and began following the footprints. Who the murderer was, I could not even faintly guess, nor could I try to explain the absence of the servants. I vaguely felt that I ought to go up to Marsh's attic quarters, but before I had fully formulated the idea I saw that the bloody trail was indeed taking me there. Was he himself the murderer? Had he gone mad under the strain of the morbid situation and suddenly run amok?

"In the attic corridor the trail became faint, the prints almost ceasing as they merged with the dark carpet. I could still, however, discern the strange single path of the entity which had gone first, and this led straight to the closed door of Marsh's studio, disappearing beneath it at a point about halfway from side to side. Evidently it had crossed the threshold at a time when the door was wide open.

"SICK at heart, I tried the knob and found the door unlocked. Opening it, I paused in the waning north light to see what fresh nightmare might be waiting me. There was certainly something human on the floor, and I reached for the switch to turn on the chandelier.

"But as the light flashed up, my gaze left the floor and its horror—that was Marsh, poor devil!—to fix itself frantically and incredulously upon the living thing that cowered and stared in the open doorway leading to Marsh's bedroom. It was a tousled, wild-eyed thing, crusted with the dried blood and carrying in its hand a wicked machete which had been one of the ornaments of the studio wall. Yet even in that awful moment I recognized it as one whom I had thought more than a thousand miles away. It was my own boy Denis—or the maddened wreck which had once been Denis.

"The sight of me seemed to bring back a trifle of sanity—or at least of memory—in the poor boy. He straightened up and began to toss his head about as if trying to shake free from some enveloping influence. I could not speak a word, but moved my lips in an effort to get back my voice. My eyes wandered for a moment to the figure on the floor in front of the heavily draped easel—the figure toward which the strange blood trail led, and which seemed to be tangled in the coils of some dark, ropy object. The shifting of my glance apparently produced some impression in the twisted brain of the boy, for suddenly he began to mutter in a hoarse whisper, the purport of which I was soon able to catch.

" 'I had to exterminate her—she was the devil!—the summit of high-priestess of all evil—the spawn of the pit—Marsh knew, and tried to warn me. Good old Frank! I didn't kill him, though I was ready to before I realized. But I went down there and killed her—then that cursed hair——'

"I listened in horror as Denis choked, paused, and began again.

" 'You didn't know—her letters got queer and I knew she was with Marsh. Then she nearly stopped writing. He never mentioned her—I felt something was wrong, and thought I ought to come back and find out. Couldn't tell you—your manner would have given it away. Wanted to surprise them. Got

here about noon today—came in a cab and sent the house-servants all off—let the field hands alone, for their cabins are all out of earshot. Told McCabe to get me some things in Cape Girardeau and not bother to come back till tomorrow. Had all the niggers take the old car and let Mary drive them to Bend Village for a vacation—told 'em we were all going on some sort of outing and wouldn't need help. Said they'd better stay all night with Uncle Scip's cousin, who keeps that nigger boarding-house.'

"Denis was getting very coherent now, and I strained my ears to grasp every word. Again I thought I heard that wild, far-off wail, but the story had first place for the present.

" 'Saw you sleeping in the parlor, and took a chance you wouldn't wake up. Then went upstairs on the quiet to hunt up Marsh and—that woman!'

"The boy shuddered as he avoided pronouncing Marceline's name. At the same time I saw his eyes dilate in unison with a bursting of the distant crying, whose vague familiarity had now become very great.

" 'She was not in her room, so I went up to the studio. Door was shut, and I could hear voices inside. Didn't knock—just burst in and found her posing for the picture. Nude, but with that hellish hair all draped around her. And making all sorts of sheep's-eyes at Marsh. He had the easel turned half away from the door, so I couldn't see the picture. Both of them were pretty well jolted when I showed up, and Marsh dropped his brush. I was in a rage and told him he'd have to show me the portrait, but he got calmer every minute—told me it wasn't quite done, but would be in a day or two—said I could see it then—she hadn't seen it.

" 'But that didn't go with me. I stepped up, and he dropped a velvet curtain over the thing before I could see it. He was ready to fight before letting me see it, but that—that—she—stepped up and sided with me. Said we ought to see it. Frank got horribly worked up, and gave me a punch when I tried to get at the curtain. I punched back and seemed to have knocked him out. Then I was almost knocked out myself by the shriek that—that creature—gave. She'd drawn aside the hangings herself, and had caught a look at what Marsh had been painting. I wheeled around and saw her rushing like mad out of the room. *Then I saw the picture.*'

"MADNESS flared up in the boy's eyes again as he got to this place, and I thought for a minute he was going to spring at me with his machete. But after a pause he partly steadied himself.

" 'O God—that thing! Don't ever look at it! Burn it with the hangings around it and throw the ashes into the river! Marsh knew—and was warning me. He knew what it was—what that woman—that leopardess, or gorgon, or lamia, or whatever she was—actually represented. He'd tried to hint to me ever since I met her in his Paris studio, but it couldn't be told in words. I thought they all wronged her when they whispered horrors about her, but this picture has caught the whole secret—the whole monstrous background!

" 'God, but Frank is an artist! That thing is the greatest piece of work any living soul has produced since Rembrandt! It's a crime to burn it, but it would be a greater crime to let it exist—just as it would have been an abhorrent sin to let that she-demon exist any longer. The minute I saw it I understood what she was, and what part

she played in the frightful secret that has come down from the days of Cthulhu and the Elder Ones—the secret that was nearly wiped out when Atlantis sunk, but that kept half alive in hidden traditions and allegorical myths and furtive, midnight cult-practises. She was the real thing. It wasn't any fake. It would have been merciful if it had been a fake. It was the old, hideous shadow that philosophers never dared mention—the thing hinted of in the *Necronomicon* and symbolized in the Easter Island colossi.

" 'She thought we couldn't see through—that the false front would hold till we had bartered away our immortal souls. And she was half right—she'd have got me in the end. She was only—waiting. But Frank—good old Frank—was too much for her. *He knew what it all meant, and painted it.* I don't wonder she shrieked and ran off when she saw it. It wasn't quite done, but God knows *enough was there.*

" 'Then I knew I'd got to kill her—kill her, and everything connected with her. It was a taint that wholesome human blood couldn't bear. There was something else, too—but you'll never know that if you burn the picture without looking. I staggered down to her room with this machete that I got off the wall here, leaving Frank still knocked out. He was breathing, though, and I knew and thanked heaven that I hadn't killed him.

" 'I found her in front of the mirror braiding that accursed hair. She turned on me like a wild beast, and began spitting out her hatred of Marsh. The fact that she'd been in love with him (and I knew she had) only made it worse. For a minute I couldn't move, and she came within an ace of completely hypnotizing me. Then I thought of the picture, and the spell broke. She saw the breaking in my eyes, and must have noticed the machete too. I never saw anything but a wild jungle beast look as she did then. She sprang for me with claws out like a leopard's, but I was too quick. I swung the machete, and it was all over.'

"Denis had to stop again there, and I saw the perspiration running down his forehead through the spattered blood. But in a moment he hoarsely resumed.

" 'I said it was all over—but God! some of it had only just begun! I felt I had fought the legions of Satan, and put my foot on the back of the thing I had annihilated. *Then I saw that blasphemous braid of coarse black hair began to twist and squirm of itself.*

" 'I might have known it. It was all in the old tales. That damnable hair had a life of its own, that couldn't be ended by killing the creature herself. I knew I'd have to burn it, so I started to hack it off with the machete. God, but it was devilish work! Tough—like iron wires—but I managed to do it. And it was loathsome the way the big braid writhed and struggled in my grasp.

" 'About the time I had the last strand cut or pulled off I heard the eldritch wailing from behind the house. It's still going, off and on. I don't know what it is, but it must be something springing from this hellish business. It half seems like something I ought to know but can't quite place. It got my nerves the first time I heard it, and I dropped the severed braid in my fright. Then I got a worse fright, for in another second the braid had turned on me and began to strike venomously with one of its ends which had knotted itself up like a sort of grotesque head. I struck out with the machete, and it turned away. Then, when I had my breath again, I saw that the monstrous

thing was crawling along the floor by itself like a great black snake. I couldn't do anything for a while, but when it vanished through the door I managed to pull myself together and stumble after it. I could follow the broad, bloody trail, and I saw it led upstairs. It brought me here—and may heaven curse me if I didn't see it through the doorway, striking at poor dazed Marsh like a maddened rattler as it had struck at me, finally coiling around him as a python would. He had begun to come to, but that abominable serpent thing got him before he was on his feet. I knew that all of that woman's hatred was behind it, but I hadn't the power to pull it off. I tried, but it was too much for me. Even the machete was no good—I couldn't swing it freely or it would have slashed Frank to pieces. So I saw those monstrous coils tighten—saw poor Frank crushed to death before my eyes—and all the time that awful faint howling came from somewhere beyond the fields.

" 'That's all. I pulled the velvet cloth over the picture, and I hope it'll never be lifted. The thing must be burnt. I couldn't pry the coils off poor, dead Frank—they clung to him like a leach, and seemed to have lost their motion altogether. It's as if that snaky rope of hair had a kind of perverse fondness for the man it killed—it's clinging to him—embracing him. You'll have to burn poor Frank with it—but for God's sake don't forget to see it in ashes! That and the picture. They must both go. The safety of the world demands that they go!'

"DENIS might have whispered more, but a fresh burst of distant wailing cut us short. For the first time we knew what it was, for a westerly veering wind brought articulate words at last. We ought to have known long before, since sounds much like it had often come from the same source. It was wrinkled Sophonisba, the ancient Zulu witchwoman who had fawned on Marceline, keening from her cabin in a way which crowned the horrors of this nightmare tragedy. We could both hear some of the things she howled, and knew that secret and primordial bonds linked this savage sorceress with that other inheritor of Elder secrets who had just been extirpated. Some of the words she used betrayed her closeness to demonic and palesgean traditions.

" *'Iä! Iä! Shub-Niggurath! Ya-R'lyeh! N'gagi n'bulu bwana n'lolo!* Ya, yo, pore Missy Tanit, pore Missy Isis! Marse Clooloo, come up outen de water an' git yo' chile—she done daid! She done daid! De har ain' got no missus no mo', Marse Clooloo. Ol' Sophy, she know! Ol' Sophy, she done got de black stone outen Big Zimbabwe in ol' Affriky! Ol' Sophy, she done dance in de moonshine roun' de crocodile-stone befo' de N'bangus cotch her and sell her to de ship folks! No mo' Tanit! No mo' Isis! No mo' witchwoman to keep de fire a-goin' in de big stone place! Ya, yo! *N'gagi 'bulu bwana m'lolo! Iä! Shub-Niggurath!* She daid! Ol Sophy know!'

"That wasn't the end of the wailing, but it was all I could pay attention to. The expression on my boy's face showed that it had reminded him of something frightful, and the tightening of his hand on the machete boded no good. I knew he was desperate, and sprang to disarm him if possible before he could do anything more.

"But I was too late. An old man with a bad spine doesn't count for much physically. There was a struggle, but he had done for himself before many seconds were over. I'm not sure yet

but that he tried to kill me, too. His last panting words were something about the need of wiping out everything that had ever been connected with Marceline, either by blood or marriage.

"I wonder to this day that I didn't go stark mad in that instant, or in the moments and hours afterward. In front of me was the slain body of my boy, the only human being I had to cherish, and ten feet away, in front of that shrouded easel, was the body of his best friend, with a nameless coil of horror wound around it. Below was the scalped corpse of that she-monster, about whom I was half ready to believe anything. I was too dazed to analyze the probability of the hair story, and even if I had not been, that dismal howling from Aunt Sophy's cabin would have been enough to quiet doubt.

"If I'd been wise, I'd have done just what poor Denis told me to—burned the picture and the body-grasping hair at once and without curiosity—but I was too shaken to be wise. I suppose I muttered foolish things over my boy—and then I remembered that the night was wearing on and that the servants would be back in the morning. It was plain that a matter like this could never be explained, and I knew that I must cover things up and invent a story.

"That coil of hair around Marsh was a monstrous thing. I didn't dare touch it, and the longer I looked at it the more horrible things I noticed about it. One thing gave me a start. I won't mention it, but it partly explained the need for feeding the hair with queer oils as Marceline had always done.

"In the end I decided to bury all three bodies in the cellar, with quicklime, which I knew we had in the storehouse. It was a night of hellish work. I dug three graves—my boy's a long way from the other two, for I didn't want him to be near either the woman's body or her hair. I was sorry I couldn't get the coil from around poor Marsh. It was terrible work getting them all down to the cellar. I used blankets in carting the woman and the poor devil with the coil around him. Then I had to get two barrels of lime from the storehouse. God must have given me strength, for I not only moved them both but filled all three graves without a hitch.

"Some of the lime I made into whitewash. I had to take a stepladder and fix over the parlor ceiling where the blood had oozed through. And I burned nearly everything in Marceline's room, scrubbing the walls and floor and heavy furniture. I washed up the attic studio, too, and the trail and footprints that led there. And all the time I could hear old Sophy's wailing in the distance. The devil must have been in that creature to let her voice go on like that. But she always was howling queer things. That's why the field niggers didn't get scared or curious that night. I locked the studio door and took the key to my room. Then I burned all my stained clothes in the fireplace. By dawn the whole house looked quite normal, so far as any casual eye could tell. I hadn't dared touch the covered easel, but meant to attend to that later.

"WELL, the servants came back next day, and I told them all the young folks had gone to St. Louis. None of the field hands seemed to have seen or heard anything, and old Sophonisba's wailing had stopped at the instant of sunrise. She was like a sphinx after that, and never let out a word of what had been on her brooding witch-brain the day and night before.

"Later on I pretended that Denis and Marsh and Marceline had gone back to Paris and had a certain discreet agency mail me letters from there—letters I had fixed up in forged handwriting. I had the deaths of Marsh and Denis reported during the war, and later said Marceline had entered a convent. Fortunately Marsh was an orphan whose eccentric ways had alienated him from his people in Louisiana. Things might have been patched up a good deal better for me if I had had the sense to burn the picture, sell the plantation, and give up trying to manage things with a shaken and overstrained mind. You see what my folly has brought me to. Failing crops, hands discharged one by one, place falling to ruin, and myself a hermit and a target for dozens of queer countryside stories. Nobody will come around here after dark nowadays—or any other time if it can be helped. That's why I knew you must be a stranger.

"And why do I stay here? I can't wholly tell you that. It's bound up too closely with things at the very rim of sane reality. It wouldn't have been so, perhaps, if I hadn't looked at the picture. I ought to have done as poor Denis told me. I honestly meant to burn it when I went up to that locked studio a week after the horror, but I looked first—and that changed everything.

"No—there's no use telling what I saw. You can, in a way, see for yourself presently; though time and dampness have done their work. I don't think it can hurt you if you want to take a look, but it was different with me. I knew too much of what it all meant.

"Denis had been right—it was the greatest triumph of human art since Rembrandt, even though still unfinished. I grasped that at the start, and knew that poor Marsh had justified his decadent philosophy. He was to painting what Baudelaire was to poetry, and Marceline was the key that had unlocked his inmost genius.

"The thing almost stunned me when I pulled aside the hangings—stunned me before I half knew what the whole thing was. You know, it's only partly a portrait. Marsh had been pretty literal when he hinted that he wasn't painting Marceline alone, but what he saw through her and beyond her.

"Of course she was in it—was the key to it, in a sense—but her figure only formed one point in a vast composition. She was nude except for that hideous web of hair spun around her, and was half seated, half reclining on a sort of bench or divan, carved in patterns unlike those of any known decorative tradition. There was a monstrously shaped goblet in one hand, from which was spilling fluid whose color I haven't been able to place or classify to this day.

"The figure and the divan were in the left-hand foreground of the strangest sort of scene I ever saw in my life. I think there was a faint suggestion of its all being a kind of emanation from the woman's brain; yet there was also a directly opposite suggestion—as if she were just an evil image or hallucination conjured up by the scene itself.

"I can't tell you now whether it's an exterior or an interior, whether those hellish cyclopean vaultings are seen from the outside or the inside, or whether they are indeed carven stone and not merely a morbid fungous arborescence. The geometry of the whole thing is crazy—one gets the acute and obtuse angles all mixed up.

"And God! The shapes of nightmare that float around in that perpetual

demon twilight! The blasphemies that lurk and leer and hold a witches' sabbat with that woman as a high priestess! The black shaggy entities that are not quite goats—the crocodile-headed beast with three legs and a dorsal row of tentacles—and the flat-nosed Ægipans dancing in a pattern that Egypt's priests knew and called accursed!

"But the scene wasn't Egypt—it was *behind* Egypt; behind even Atlantis; behind fabled Mu, and myth-whispered Lemuria. It was the ultimate fountainhead of all horror on this earth, and the symbolism showed only too clearly how integral a part of it Marceline was. I think it must be the unmentionable R'lyeh, that was not built by any creatures of our planet — the thing Marsh and Denis used to talk about in the shadows with hushed voices. In the picture it appears that the whole scene is deep under water, though everybody seems to be breathing freely.

"WELL, I couldn't do anything but look and shudder, and finally I saw that Marceline was watching me craftily out of those monstrous, dilated eyes on the canvas. It was no mere superstition — Marsh had actually caught something of her horrible vitality in his symphonies of line and color; so that she still brooded and stared and hated, just as if most of her weren't down in the cellar under quicklime. *And it was worst of all when some of those Hecate-born snaky strands of hair began to lift themselves up from the surface and grope out into the room toward me!*

"Then it was that I knew the last final horror, and realized I was a guardian and a prisoner for ever. She was the thing from which the first dim legends of Medusa and the Gorgons had sprung, and something in my shaken will had been captured and turned to stone at last. Never again would I be safe from those coiling snaky strands—the strands in the picture, and those that lay brooding under the lime near the wine casks. All too late I recalled the tales of the virtual indestructibility, even through centuries of burial, of the hair of the dead.

"My life since has been nothing but horror and slavery. Always there has lurked the fear of what broods down in the cellar. In less than a month the niggers began whispering about the great black snake that crawled around near the wine casks after dark, and about the curious way its trail would lead to another spot six feet away. Finally I had to move everything to another part of the cellar, for not a darky could be induced to go near the place where the snake was seen.

"Then the field hands began talking about the black snake that visited old Sophonisba's cabin every night after midnight. One of them showed me its trail, and not long afterward I found out that Aunt Sophy herself had begun to pay strange visits to the cellar of the big house, lingering and muttering for hours in the very spot where none of the other blacks would go. God, but I was glad when that old witch died! I honestly believe she had been a priestess of some ancient and terrible tradition back in Africa. She must have lived to be almost a hundred and fifty years old.

"Sometimes I think I hear something gliding around the house at night. There will be a queer noise on the stairs, where the boards are loose, and the latch of my room will rattle as if with an inward pressure. I always keep my door locked, of course. Then there are certain mornings when I seem to catch a sickish musty odor in the corri-

dors, and notice a faint, ropy trail through the dust of the floors. I know I must guard the hair in the picture, for if anything were to happen to it, there are entities in this house which would take a sure and terrible revenge. I don't even dare to die; for life and death are all one to those in the clutch of what came out of R'lyeh. Something would be on hand to punish my neglect. Medusa's coil has got me, and it will always be the same. Never mix up with secret and ultimate horror, young man, if you value your immortal soul."

As THE old man finished his story I saw that the small lamp had long since burned dry, and that the large one was nearly empty. It must, I knew, be near dawn; and my ears told me that the storm was over. The tale had held me in a half-daze, and I almost feared to glance at the door lest it reveal an inward pressure from some unnamable source. It would be hard to say which had the greatest hold on me—stark horror, incredulity, or a kind of morbid fantastic curiosity. I was wholly beyond speech and had to wait for my strange host to break the spell.

"Do you want to see—the thing?"

His voice was very low and hesitant, and I saw he was tremendously in earnest. Of my various emotions, curiosity gained the upper hand, and I nodded silently. He rose, lighting a candle on a near-by table and holding it high before him as he opened the door.

"Come with me—upstairs."

I dreaded to brave those musty corridors again, but fascination downed all my qualms. The boards creaked beneath our feet, and I trembled once when I thought I saw a faint, rope-like line traced in the dust near the staircase.

The steps of the attic were noisy and rickety, with several of the treads missing. I was glad of the need of looking sharply to my footing, for it gave me an excuse not to glance about. The attic corridor was pitch-black and heavily cobwebbed, and inch-deep with dust except where a beaten trail led to a door on the left at the farther end. As I noticed the rotting remains of a thick carpet, I thought of the other feet which had pressed it in bygone decades—of these, and of one thing which did not have feet.

The old man took me straight to the door at the end of the beaten path, and fumbled a second with the rusty latch. I was acutely frightened now that I knew the picture was so close, yet dared not retreat at this stage. In another moment my host was ushering me into the deserted studio.

The candlelight was very faint, yet served to show most of the principal features. I noticed the low, slanting roof, the huge enlarged dormer, the curios and trophies hung on the walls, and most of all, the great shrouded easel in the center of the floor. To that easel de Russy now walked, drawing aside the dusty velvet hangings on the side turned away from me, and motioning me silently to approach. It took a good deal of courage to make me obey, especially when I saw how my guide's eyes dilated in the wavering candlelight as he looked at the unveiled canvas. But again curiosity conquered everything, and I walked around to where de Russy stood. Then I saw the damnable thing.

I did not faint, though no reader can possibly realize the effort it took to keep me from doing so. I did cry out, but stopped short when I saw the frightened look on the old man's face. As I had expected, the canvas was

warped, moldy, and scabrous from dampness and neglect; but for all that I could trace the monstrous hints of evil cosmic outsideness that lurked all through the nameless scene's morbid content and perverted geometry.

It was as the old man had said: a vaulted, columned hell of mingled Black Masses and witches' sabbats, and what perfect completion could have added to it was beyond my power to guess. Decay had only increased the utter hideousness of its wicked symbolism and diseased suggestion; for the parts most affected by time were just these parts of the picture which in nature—or in that extra-cosmic realm that mocked nature—would be likely to decay or disintegrate.

The utmost horror of all, of course, was Marceline; and as I saw the bloated, discolored flesh I formed the odd fancy that perhaps the figure on the canvas had some obscure, occult linkage with the figure which lay in quicklime under the cellar floor. Perhaps the lime had preserved the corpse instead of destroying it—but could it have preserved those black, malign eyes that glared and mocked at me from their painted hell?

And there was something else about the creature which I could not fail to notice—something which de Russy had not been able to put into words, but which perhaps had something to do with Denis' wish to kill all those of his blood who had dwelt under the same roof with her. Whether Marsh knew, or whether the genius in him painted it without his knowing, none could say. But Denis and his father could not have known till they saw the picture.

Surpassing all in horror was the streaming black hair, which covered the rotting body, *but which was itself not even slightly decayed.* All I had heard of it was amply verified. It was nothing human, this ropy, sinuous, half-oily, half-crinkly flood of serpent darkness. Vile, independent life proclaimed itself at every unnatural twist and convolution, and the suggestion of numberless *reptilian* heads at the outturned ends was far too marked to be illusory or accidental.

THE blasphemous thing held me like a magnet. I was helpless, and did not wonder at the myth of the gorgon's glance which turned all beholders to stone. Then I thought I saw a change come over the thing. The leering features perceptibly moved, so that the rotting jaw fell, allowing the thick, beast-like lips to disclose a row of pointed yellow fangs. The pupils of the fiendish eyes dilated, and the eyes themselves seemed to bulge outward. And the hair—that accursed hair! *It had begun to rustle and wave perceptibly, the snake-heads all turning toward de Russy and vibrating as if to strike!*

Reason deserted me altogether, and before I knew what I was doing I drew my revolver and sent a shower of six steel-jacketed bullets through the shocking canvas. The whole thing at once fell to pieces, even the frame toppling from the easel and clattering to the dust-covered floor. But though this horror was shattered, another had risen before me in the form of de Russy himself, whose maddened shricks as he saw the picture vanish were almost as terrible as the picture itself had been.

With a half-articulate scream of "God, now you've done it!" the frantic old man seized me violently by the arm and commenced to drag me out of the room and down the rickety stairs. He had dropped the candle in his panic,

but dawn was near, and some faint gray light was filtering in through the dust-covered windows. I tripped and stumbled repeatedly, but never for a moment would my guide slacken his pace.

"Run!" he shrieked, "run for your life! You don't know what you've done! I never told you the whole thing! There were things I had to do —*the picture talked to me and told me.* I had to guard and keep it—now the worst will happen! *She and that hair will come up out of their graves, for God knows what purpose!*

"Hurry, man! For God's sake let's get out of here while there's time. If you have a car, take me along to Cape Girardeau with you. It may get me in the end, anywhere, but I'll give it a run for its money. Out of here—quick!"

As we reached the ground floor I became aware of a slow, curious thumping from the rear of the house, followed by the sound of a door shutting. De Russy had not heard the thumping, but the other noise caught his ear and drew from him the most terrible shriek that ever sounded in human throat.

"Oh, God—great God—that was the cellar door—she's coming——"

By this time I was desperately wrestling with the rusty latch and sagging hinges of the great front door—almost as frantic as my host, now that I heard the slow, thumping tread approaching from the unknown rear rooms of the accursed mansion. The night's rain had warped the oaken planks, and the heavy door stuck and resisted even more strongly than it had when I forced an entrance the evening before.

Somewhere a plank creaked beneath the foot of whatever was walking, and the sound seemed to snap the last cord of sanity in the poor old man. With a roar like that of a maddened bull he released his grip on me and made a plunge to the right, through the open door of a room which I judged had been a parlor. A second later, just as I got the front door open and was making my own escape, I heard the tinkling clatter of broken glass and knew he had leapt through a window. And as I bounded off the sagging porch to commence my mad race down the long, weed-grown drive I thought I could catch the thud of dead, dogged footfalls which did not follow me, but which kept leadenly on through the door of the cobwebbed parlor.

I looked backward only twice as I plunged heedlessly through the burrs and briars of that abandoned drive, past the dying lindens and grotesque scrub-oaks, in the gray pallor of a cloudy November dawn. The first time was when an acrid smell overtook me, and I thought of the candle de Russy had dropped in the attic studio. By then I was comfortably near the road, on the high place from which the roof of the distant house was clearly visible above its encircling trees; and just as I expected, thick clouds of smoke were billowing out of the attic dormers and curling upward into the leaden heavens. I thanked the powers of creation that an immemorial curse was about to be purged by fire and blotted from the earth.

But in the next instant came that second backward look in which I glimpsed two other things—things that canceled most of the relief and gave me a supreme shock from which I shall never recover. I have said that I was on a high part of the drive, from which much of the plantation behind me was visible. This vista included not only the house and its trees but some of the abandoned and partly flooded flat land beside the river, and several bends of

the weed-choked drive I had been so hastily traversing. In both of these latter places I now beheld sights—or suspicions of sights—which I wish devoutly I could deny.

It was a faint, distant scream which made me turn back again, and as I did so I caught a trace of motion on the dull gray marshy plain behind the house. At that distance human figures are very small; yet I thought the motion resolved itself into two of these, pursuer and pursued. I even thought I saw the dark-clothed leading figure overtaken and seized by the bald, naked figure in the rear — overtaken, seized, and dragged violently in the direction of the now burning house.

But I could not watch the outcome, for at once a nearer sight obtruded itself—a suggestion of motion among the underbrush at a point some distance back along the deserted drive. *Unmistakably, the weeds and bushes and briars were swaying as no wind could sway them; swaying as if some large, swift serpent were wriggling purposefully along on the ground in pursuit of me.*

THAT was all I could stand. I scrambled along madly for the gate, heedless of torn clothing and bleeding scratches, and jumped into the roadster parked under the great evergreen tree. It was a bedraggled, rain-drenched sight, but the works were unharmed and I had no trouble in starting the thing. I went on blindly in the direction the car was headed for. Nothing was in my mind but to get away from that frightful region of nightmares and cacodemons—to get away as quickly and as far as gasoline could take me.

About three or four miles along the road a farmer hailed me—a kindly, drawling fellow of middle age and considerable native intelligence. I was glad to slow down and ask directions, though I knew I must present a strange enough aspect. The man readily told me the way to Cape Girardeau, and inquired where I had come from in such a state at such an early hour. Thinking it best to say little, I merely mentioned that I had been caught in the night's rain and had taken shelter at a near-by farmhouse, afterward losing my way in the underbrush trying to find my car.

"At a farmhouse, eh? Wonder whose it coulda ben. Ain't nothin' standin' this side o' Jim Ferris' place acrost Barker's Crick, an' that's all o' twenty miles by the rud."

I gave a start, and wondered what fresh mystery this portended, then asked my informant if he had overlooked the large ruined plantation house whose ancient gate bordered the road not far back.

"Funny ye sh'd recolleck that, stranger! Musta ben here afore sometime. But that house ain't there now. Burnt down five or six years ago—and they did tell some queer stories about it."

I shuddered.

"You mean Riverside—ol' man de Russy's place. Queer goin's on there fifteen or twenty years ago. Ol' man's boy married a gal from abroad, and some folks thought she was a mighty odd sort. Didn't like the looks of her. Then she and the boy went off sudden, and later on the ol' man said he was kilt in the war. But some o' the niggers hinted queer things. Got around at last that the ol' fellow fell in love with the gal himself and kilt her and the boy. That place was sure enough ha'nted by a black snake, mean that what it may.

"Then five or six years ago the ol' man disappeared and the house burned down. Some do say he was burnt up in

it. It was a mornin' after a rainy night just like this, when lots o' folks heard an awful yellin' acrost the fields in old de Russy's voice. When they stopped and looked, they see the house goin' up in smoke quick as a wink—that place was all like tinder anyhow, rain or no rain. Nobody never seen the ol' man agin, but onct in a while they tell of the ghost of that big black snake glidin' aroun'.

"What d'you make of it, anyhow? You seem to hev knowed the place. Didn't ye ever hear tell of the de Russys? What d'ye reckon was the trouble with that gal young Denis married? She kinder made everybody shiver and feel hateful, though ye couldn't never tell why."

I was trying to think, but that process was almost beyond me now. The house burned years ago? Then where, and under what conditions, had I passed the night? And why did I know what I knew of these things? Even as I pondered I saw a hair on my coat sleeve—the short, gray hair of an old man.

In the end I drove on without telling anything. But I did hint that gossip was wronging the poor old planter who had suffered so much. I made it clear—as if from distant but authentic reports wafted among friends—that if anyone was to blame for the trouble at Riverside it was the woman, Marceline. She was not suited to Missouri ways, I said, and it was too bad that Denis had ever married her.

More I did not intimate, for I felt that the de Russys, with their proudly cherished honor and high, sensitive spirits, would not wish me to say more. They had borne enough, God knows, without the countryside guessing what a demon of the pit, what a gorgon of the Elder blasphemies, had come to flaunt their ancient and stainless name.

Nor was it right that the neighbors should know that other horror which my strange host of the night could not bring himself to tell me—that horror which he must have learned as I learned it, from details in the lost masterpiece of poor Frank Marsh.

It would be too hideous if they knew that the one-time heiress of Riverside—the accursed gorgon or lamia whose hateful crinkly coil of serpent-hair must even now be brooding and twining vampirically around an artist's skeleton in a lime-packed grave beneath a charred foundation—was faintly, subtly, yet unmistakably the scion of Zimbabwe's most primal grovelers. No wonder she owned a link with the old witchwoman Sophonisba—for, though in deceitfully slight proportion, Marceline was a loathsome, bestial thing, and her forebears had come from Africa.

WHAT HAPPENED TO CROSS-PATCH?

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The Fifth Candle

By CYRIL MAND

The Old Man reached back from his grave each year to light one candle in a weird candelabrum, and strange was the doom that came to the brothers when that candle expired

I fled, and cried out Death;
Hell trembled at the hideous name, and sighed
From all her caves, and back resounded Death.
—MILTON: *Paradise Lost.*

LAUGHABLE—isn't it?—that one so cynical and unbelieving as I should sit here, quivering and shaking in fear of a specter; that I should cower in dread, listening to the inexorable ticking of the remorseless clock. Amusing, indeed, that I should know terror.

And yet five years ago when we sat at this table, we five Brunof brothers, the way we laughed! The pall of stale, blue cigarette smoke that hung over us was an exotic mask for the strident laughter that echoed and re-echoed through it. The dim electric light filtered through its mistiness, centering upon the figure of the Old Man at the head of the table, frothing in fury. We were taunting him—perhaps a little too much, for of a sudden he calmed. His face became grim, almost imposing in spite of the tracks of illness and age. His thin falsetto voice took on tone.

"So be it then! You, my evil sons —you who instead of filial love and respect have given me affront and irreverence — you who have repeatedly brought disgrace upon my name—you who have been profligates, who through your squandering have nearly ruined me — you who have brought me to death's door—you shall now pay for your flagrancy.

"I was born in Russia—not the gay, carefree Russia of Moscow or Saint Petersburg but the silent, frigid Russia of the Kirghiz levels. The knowledge that for centuries has been the lore of these steppes was born into me. Jeer if you want to. My years of study in the occult have not caused you alarm thus far. Let them not trouble you now.

"Look at that candelabrum with its five candles. I die tonight. But every year on this day, March 21, at this hour, eight o'clock, I shall return to this room to light a candle in that candelabrum. And as each candle burns itself down and flickers and dies, so shall one of you weaken and die. May this be my legacy to you, my evil sons!"

He retired beyond the scope of the haze-diffused light into the black yawn of the hallway, leaving us laughing and hurling gibes at his retreating figure. Later, we did not laugh so much, when we went into his somber walnut-paneled room and found his shriveled body at the desk, his lifeless head with beady eyes glazed in death, pillowed on the crumpled pages of one of his evil Russian volumes.

THE Old Man left the house to all of us, together. Because of this, and also of our lack of money, March 21 of the next year found us all, but one, Sergei, seated at the table at dinner. The odors and harsh clatter of dinner-

time jarred against the calm placidity of approaching spring. We were laughing again. Ivan, who always did seem like a younger and more droll edition of myself, had remembered the anniversary of the curse. With mock ceremony he had abstained from lighting one of the candles in the candelabrum and had made us leave the chair at the head of the table vacant. Now we sat listening to his ribald jests at the Old Man's expense.

"Be patient, brothers. But four and one-half minutes more," he said, glancing at the huge, gold-handed Peter the First clock at the side of the room, "and we shall be again honored by the presence of our esteemed father. And who shall be the first he takes back with him? Certainly not me—the youngest. Probably you, Alexei," he grinned at me. "He always did hate you most. Ever fleering him in your nice quiet way. Sneering. Laughing up your sleeve at him and his distemper. And then, too, you are the oldest of us. You're first in line. Boris, why don't you pray for him a bit? A religious cove

"He decided that the best protection against the Old Man would be to fight him with his own weapon—the occult."

like you ought to be able to really go to town on his black soul.

"Ah, it's time for our phantom. It's eight o'clock. Hello, Old Man." He rose, bowing to an imaginary figure at the door. "How are you? How's it back there in Hades? You *did* go there. Sit right dow——" His speech died off.

The chamber darkened. A queer, spectral haze filled the room. It swished and swirled, yet ever contracted toward a single point—the chair at the head of the table. We gazed, stupefied. It became a shape. The shape became—a man. There could be no mistake. The shriveled figure; the wolfish head with its piercing, beady eyes, hawk-like nose, bulging forehead, and parchment cheeks—it was the Old Man!

We stared aghast. Ivan staggered back. Boris crossed himself. Dmitri and I just sat, unnerved, frozen into impotency. The Old Man stood up. He slowly extended his fleshless hand toward the malefically scintillating candelabrum on the table. The unlit candle flared into life! His well-remembered falsetto came as of old, seeming strangely melancholy.

"Even as this candle burns down and flickers and dies, so shall you weaken and die, Ivan."

Ivan gasped. Dmitri's oath shattered the silence as he leaped up and reached for the fowling-piece over the mantel. He grasped it and fired blindly as he turned. The detonation echoed back and forth in the narrow confines of the room. The air was polluted by gun smoke and the bitter tang of exploded powder. The candle sputtered, undulated, and flamed on. The smoke cleared slowly. The misty figure of the Old Man was gone. And on the floor, thrashing frantically, lay Ivan, blood spurting from a wound in his chest.

We rushed to him, all except Boris, who stood, devoutly blind eyes fixed on the ceiling, muttering monotonous prayer. Dmitri cursed himself violently. It was a mortal wound. We bandaged him in vain. His life ebbed out with his blood. And as he breathed out his last, the lone candle flickered and went out.

THE trial was a nightmare. Of course, we three brothers stood firmly behind Dmitri. Sergei was the real mainstay, though. He saw to the selecting and the hiring of the lawyers, and the various other matters of Dmitri's defense. As a prosperous business man his influence and money aided us immeasurably. Throughout Dmitri's successive convictions for first degree murder, it was always Sergei who secured another appeal and carried the case to a still higher court while the months dragged along. But it was all futile. Dmitri and Ivan had always been utter opposites in character. As a result, they had had violent and frequent quarrels. It was these clashes of opposing wills—in reality unimportant, but to the world highly significant — that were now continually flaunted before the jury. At each trial we repeated the story of the Old Man's curse and the part it had played in Ivan's death—and were laughed down as liars, lunatics, or both. We only succeeded in making our case ridiculous and in tying tighter the noose around Dmitri's neck. We fought on in vain.

In the heat of litigation we almost forgot the shadow that hung over us too. And yet the sands were running low.

Finally, the inevitable occurred. On January 30, the highest court of the state set the date of execution by hanging for the week of March 17. The governor refused a reprieve. We could

do no more. We gave up the fight and went home.

On the night of March 21, a few minutes after eight o'clock, at the same time that three brothers sitting at dinner watched a lone candle flicker and burn out, Dmitri Brunof at the state penitentiary was executed for murder in the first degree.

Boris was really frightened now. According to age he was next to go after Dmitri. He lived in a mortal funk of terror. For a time he turned to religion as a means of escape. The pageantry and ceremonies of the Church imparted to him an illusion of power and protection. However, religion was not the thing for him now. It had an undue influence on his mind, battered as it was by repeated shock and terror; and his inherent mysticism was intensified by it to a stark fanaticism.

His superstitions, too, were magnified and stimulated. He grew into an unreasoning dread of the dark. He became the victim of charlatans and fakes. He spent his money on occult remedies and charms. Any exhibition of seemingly supernatural power awed and frightened him.

And then at a stage show of Edward Rentmore, the English wizard, he went into hysterics. This and the notoriety we had achieved through our evidence at Dmitri's trial were enough to gain us Rentmore's attention. Besides being an illusionist, he had gained quite a degree of fame as a medium. To Boris, whom he now befriended, he was another bulwark against the power of the Old Man. Under his influence Boris became an adherent of spiritualism. He developed into an actual disciple of Rentmore. And finally Rentmore brought his mind to bear upon his underling's problem. As was natural to him, considering his vocation, he decided that the best protection against the Old Man would be to fight him with his own weapon—the occult. And so, during the time remaining till March 21 Boris and Rentmore were engaged in preparing for the destruction of the Old Man on the night of his appearance. They sat up far into the night poring over the Old Man's malefic Russian volumes. It was in that dimly-lit library that they learned to develop their innate mind-forces. Sergei and I just waited, watching skeptically, grimly amused.

On March 21 at dinner, Rentmore, Boris, Sergei and I were seated at the table. It was almost eight o'clock. The dim, inadequate light illuminated us feebly: Sergei, white face twisted into a cynical smile; Boris, nervously confident; and Rentmore, his sallow, yellow face frozen into a featureless impenetrability.

We were hardly surprised when that unearthly mist came and condensed, forming the shape of the Old Man. Sergei and I sat as if drugged, detachedly curious as spectators, conscious of the seething ferment of battle around us. We *felt* that struggle—mind against mind, will against will, knowledge against knowledge.

Then, as the beat of the hostile wills fell upon it, the form of the Old Man seemed to blur, diffuse, go queerly out of focus. We were winning! My detachedness vanished. I felt jubilant. The shadow that hung over us was lifting. But no! The figure of the Old Man once more took on its sharp, well-defined lines. Inexorably his arm reached out. Slowly, almost as if reluctantly, the candle in the candelabrum flamed up in response to that outstretched, withered hand. That thin

statement of doom once more shrilled through the air.

"Even as this candle burns down and flickers and dies, so shall you weaken and die, Boris."

We stared at the candle, fascinated—not even noticing in what manner the Old Man went. The Peter the First clock ticked on, its golden hands slicing time and life, slowly and deliberately. The candle burned with a steady, even flame. Minutes passed. Rentmore lay in an exhausted stupor. The flame flickered, danced wildly as some slight current of air twisted it askew. It steadied, then flickered again. For a moment it writhed fitfully, sputtering.

Boris screamed—a long, agonized shriek. He started up, with one hand sweeping the candelabrum from the table, with the other fumbling at the insecurely mounted light-button. Then, suddenly, he choked, gasped, as if suffocating. The candelabrum seemed to cling to his hand. His twisted face mimicked our horror.

He slumped to the floor, breaking that lethal current of electricity, a grotesque heap of death. The candelabrum slipped from his hand, its clatter muffled by the exotic thickness of the Khivan rug.

SERGEI had always been the cleverest one of us. He was practical, and besides his native cunning he possessed a good amount of real intelligence. Therefore, to him, of all the brothers, had passed the administration of our affairs. And certainly he had always done well in this capacity.

Whenever he had a problem, either personal or of business, he sat down alone in a half-dark room and there analyzed, speculated, and made and discarded schemes until he was sure he had the correct solution. It was this that he did now. The day after Boris' death he sat for a long time in the huge, half-lit dining-room, staring with perplexed eyes and knit brows at the candelabrum. It was long after I had gone to a sleepless bed that I heard him tread heavily up to his room.

The next morning he gave me his solution as I knew he would. "It seems that just two things are menacing us—the Old Man and the candelabrum. It is these two things that we must fight against if we want to survive. The Old Man is, of course, beyond our reach. However, the candelabrum——" His hand had knocked over a glass of water. He regarded the weaving track of the spilled liquid. "It is of solid gold and valuable. This afternoon when I go to the city I shall take it with me. At the Government mint I shall sell it as old gold. Within a week, probably, it will be melted down and stamped into coins. The coins will circulate and by March 21 the candelabrum will be scattered all over the country. Then let us see how our esteemed father will take the loss of his precious candelabrum. In his present state he can hardly curse another of the things. Yes, I think we are safe. . . ."

I rather agreed with him. I rejoiced now as in the old days Ivan, Dmitri, Boris and I had rejoiced together in having a brother gifted with that elusive thing—common sense. I was confident that Sergei's canniness had saved us. The candelabrum was duly sold and, as our inquiries a few months later proved, melted down. Thus with the material threat of the curse removed, our fears vanished. We joked again, if rather grimly, of the Old Man. We mocked once more—mimicking the Old Man's falsetto voice. We speculated endlessly as to what the Old Man would do when he

failed to find the candelabrum when he came to light it—or did he know already? We laughed again. . . . The days and weeks and months passed quickly, unclouded.

March 21 found me at a friend's house. Sergei was traveling again on one of his business trips, and I had no desire to be present alone when the Old Man came to light the candle in the vanished candelabrum. The day, the evening, and even the eighth hour passed easily. My friend and I chatted, supped, and played chess. Finally we went to bed.

I dropped off to sleep almost immediately. And then—out of the forefront of oblivion, as if he had been waiting for me, came the Old Man. The black nothingness behind him became a swirling mist that advanced and settled down around us. I was seated at the table. I looked wildly about me. There at the side the Peter the First clock marked eight o'clock. The candelabrum occupied the center of the table. And as the candle in it flared into life, the Old Man's words came to me.

"Even as this candle burns down and flickers out, so shall you weaken and die, Sergei."

I awoke shrieking at the gray dawn.

I dressed hurriedly, rushed downstairs, and seized the newspaper. The front page was smeared with a flamboyantly written and detailed account of a railway wreck. I read it through carefully. Among the killed was—Sergei Brunof. I looked for the time of the crash, strangely calm now. Yes, it had happened just after eight.

FOR two weeks I could not bring myself to go to the mansion. Not only was it the fear of that lonely old building with its charnel atmosphere, but also melancholy that kept me away. I knew how sad it would be to live there with the shades of vanished lives and muted laughter. The phantoms of my four brothers and the Old Man still peopled those silent rooms and empty halls.

Finally I did again venture into the dark oppressiveness of the house. And then in the dining-room I received another shock. There on the table where it had always stood before, and where I had seen it in the dream, was the candelabrum. Ridiculous, fantastic, impossible! And yet there it was, its dull golden glitter mocking me! I was stricken, bemazed—and yet really I knew that I had expected some such thing. So I just left it there.

And so it stood there throughout the year. Every day I sat at the table and ate my lonely meals, watching it cautiously, as if it were a live, malevolent being. I think I went a little mad watching it. It seemed to hypnotize me, too. It possessed an eery power over my mind. It drew me from whatever I was doing at times. I sat and gazed at it for hours. I mused endlessly as to what strange hands had hammered it again to its old shape, what weird tools had again formed its graceful branches. And all the time it seemed to be possessed of that same unearthly sentience. I could hardly bear even to dust it. I tried a few times to escape its evil spell. I went away—only to leave abruptly wherever I was, lured back to the dank old house and the glittering candelabrum. I lost contact with all humans. My supplies were sent out from the city by a boy who seemed to fear me as if I were the devil himself. I hardly ate. I just watched it. It seemed the only real thing in a house of mist and indistinctness. Vague and unrelated thoughts

crept into my mind. I felt strangely confused and bewildered. It inspired me with an irrational and insatiable longing for something—I don't know what. I took to stalking the long, gloomy corridors in a frenzied search for the non-existent.

Today, cold fear jelled my panic into a sort of blunt insensibility when I realized that it was March 21. I sat all day at the table in a dull stupor, staring with dead, vacant eyes at the golden candelabrum.

Suddenly the desire to set this tale on paper came to me. The reaction to my apathy set in. Of a sudden I was full of a nervous, driving energy. For the past hour I have been sitting here writing. I am glad that I have been able to finish in time. The hour for the fifth candle draws near.

Ivan, Dmitri, Sergei, Boris—they are all gone. The Old Man took them. And certainly he will take me, too. Perhaps it will be just as well if I join them. I'll be back among my own. Dust to dust. . . .

It is after eight already. The candelabrum is empty of candles. I wonder, will he bring one. . . .

The Warrior

To Robert E. Howard

By EMIL PETAJA

From ancient dark Cimmeria he came,
With sword uplifted, on that bloody day,
To join the falling forces in affray,
And all triumphant spurn eternal fame.
Men trembled at the mention of his name,
And humbly stepped aside to clear a way;
"You are our King," they said. He answered, "Nay,"
And left them wondering what could be his aim.

I saw him then, and still I see him now,
Cryptic and silent, on a lone hill's brow,
Watching with brooding eyes the scene below
Where flame the earth and sky in scarlet hands
He grasps his curious staff in mighty hands
And strides into the dusk, toward other lands. . . .

"When I dance amid the striking lightning, he dances with me too."

Bride of the Lightning

By EDMOND HAMILTON

Sheila danced on the hilltop while fierce bolts of lightning played about her—but what was that coiling thing of dazzling brilliance that reached for her with its arms of living light?

CRASH after crash of thunder split the night and rumbled away across the dark Wisconsin hills. Before each detonation, the blinding fizz of the lightning illuminated the winding road in front of Dick Forman. His crisp blond face tautened and he pushed the coupé faster up the

grades, hoping to get to Adam Crail's house before the rain broke.

Dick rounded a turn in the road, and then suddenly applied his brakes with a startled gasp of horror. Beside the road rose the black, humped mass of a low, domed hill. Bolt after bolt of terrific lightning was striking its bare summit, succeeding one another in brilliant flashes that wreathed the summit in searing light. And up there in that wild lightning was a girl!

Dick Forman could glimpse her, running and leaping up there, amid the dazzling flashes. He exclaimed, "Good God, why doesn't she get away from that hilltop?"

He jerked back the hand brake and leaped out of his car. In a moment he was running up the slope, through brambles and briars, toward the lightning-wreathed summit.

Dick's eyes were nearly blinded by the flashes of lightning that came each few moments, all striking on the summit. He had never seen lightning strike so successively in the same spot, and his ears were deafened by the cataclysmic crashes of thunder.

He stumbled up onto the bare, rocky summit and peered incredulously across it. The lightning was striking now on one part of the summit, now another. And there amid the bolts was the girl he had seen. She was dancing!

The weirdness of it held Dick petrified even in the face of the blasting menace. The girl was young, a slim figure in a short white dress, her black hair streaming in the wind. Her face was wild and lovely, ablaze with a strange, mad intoxication.

To right and left of her, sometimes only a few yards away, smote the splashing blasts of lightning. And with each new bolt, she flung her white arms high, wild face upturned to the tempest, dancing amid the bolts like some nymph of fire and storm.

Dick Forman recovered his presence of mind and ran desperately out over the summit toward her. There was a sulfurous smell in the air, and twice as he ran, the whole hilltop shook to the impact of new crashing bolts. Then he reached the girl and grasped her.

"Are you crazy to stay up here in this storm?" he yelled. "You've got to get out of here before you're hit!"

He was trying to drag her away. But the girl resisted furiously, struggling in his arms.

"Let me go!" she cried. "He is coming—He will be here soon——"

"What are you talking about?" cried Forman.

"The Lord of Lightning is coming!" the girl exclaimed. As another terrific bolt struck near them, she turned her dynamic face skyward with wild exultation. "Those are His messengers. He is coming, and will kill you like the others if He finds you here!"

DICK FORMAN wasted no more time in argument. It seemed evident to him that the girl was crazy and that they would both be killed if they stayed much longer in this lightning-haunted spot.

He snatched her up in his arms and started back down from the summit in a stumbling run. The girl struggled like a wildcat in his arms, her soft limbs writhing fiercely, her hands clawing at his face. Two more terrific bolts hit somewhere behind them, filling the world with light and thunder.

Then Dick was stumbling down through the briars to the road where his coupé waited. He shoved the girl unceremoniously into the car. Up there on the summit, the lightning had now become even fiercer—it was as though

the whole hilltop was alive with dancing white flame.

The girl was straining wildly against the window of the car, peering up with her body quivering and her nostrils dilated with emotion. Her wide, dark violet eyes reflected each flare of the terrific lightning.

"See, He has come!" she cried, pointing up to the summit. "The Lord of Lightning has come again, and I am not there to meet Him!"

"You're crazy as Christmas!" exclaimed Dick Forman, holding her arm while he started the car. "You're——"

Then as he glanced up toward the lightning-wreathed hilltop, the words died on his lips and his jaw dropped. There *was* something up there amid the volleying lightning: a strange, coiling shape of dazzling light that seemed to float amid the terrific bolts; a shining thing that moved this way and that over the hilltop as though searching. Dick had heard of odd freaks of ball lightning, but had never seen one like this.

"The Lord of Lightning!" the girl was shrilling. "I must go to Him—let me go——"

For answer, Dick let in the gears and sent the coupé racing forward with motor roaring. His mind was in a mad turmoil from the strangeness of all this.

A chance bolt struck a tree beside the road, and he heard it crash down behind them as the coupé sped past.

"You see, He will kill you if He learns that you are taking me away!" cried the girl.

But now the lightning back there on the domed hilltop was diminishing. The storm was moving off across the black hills, and as Dick drove on at full speed, the mad uproar dwindled into a sullen, distant grumbling and far-off flares.

He slowed down the coupé, then. His brow was damp and he felt as though for a moment he had been moving in a nightmare. He turned and looked at the girl. She had become silent now that the storm was moving off, but her dark violet eyes were still wide and brilliant.

"Why in the world were you risking your life up there in that lightning?" Dick Forman asked her. "And what's your name and where do you live?"

"I'm Sheila Crail," she said slowly. "I live with my uncle, Adam Crail, in the next farmhouse down this road."

"Adam Crail?" he repeated. "Why, that's the man I'm here to see—I'm Dick Forman, of a Milwaukee bank, and I'm up here to see your uncle on business. But you haven't told me why you were dancing about in that crazy lightning," he added. "Why, you might have been killed."

"The lightning would not hurt me," Sheila said soberly. "Many times during storms I have been on that hilltop. I love the lightning and it is always wilder on that hill than anywhere else. I go there because I love to see it strike about me, and to hear the thunder of its voice."

"But what was that stuff you were crying out about the Lord of Lightning, and how he would kill me?" Dick Forman pressed.

Sheila hesitated. "I do not think you would believe if I told you. But there is something that comes when the lightning is fiercest—something that is a living thing of force, of lightning. You glimpsed it yourself, that dazzling shape amid the bolts. I call it the Lord of Lightning. When I dance amid the striking lightning, He dances with me too. And I think that He is very jealous of me, for in the past those who have tried to make love to me have died —by lightning."

She laid a soft hand with sudden ap-

peal on his wrist. "Dick, sometimes I am a little afraid—of Him. But I am always drawn by the lightning. Since I was a little child, and clapped my hands at storms, it has fascinated me, attracted me——"

Dick felt quick sympathy. "Why, you poor kid, you've lived out here so long by yourself that you've worked up all kinds of queer fancies about storms and lightning. That shining thing I saw—it was just a freak of ball lightning, that's all. Your imagination is simply over-active."

Sheila shook her dark head. "It is not so. The Lord of Lightning is real, and terrible——" She broke off suddenly. "But here is our house."

It was a rambling old stone farmhouse sitting well back from the road amid tall pines and spruces. Yellow lamplight glowed from its lower windows. As Dick stopped the car and helped the girl out, two men came out to meet them on the porch.

One was an elderly, spare man with a clean-shaven face that sagged with worry, and fear-haunted eyes. From behind him peered a bulky, straw-haired farmer with a blocky, suspicious face.

The older man, as he saw the girl, cried, "Sheila, when I heard the storm I went to your room and couldn't find you. You've been to the hill again!"

Her dark head hung and she whispered, "Yes, I could not help it——"

She suddenly ran past them into the house.

Dick noticed that the big farmer shrank back from her in instinctive, fearful recoil as she passed.

Forman advanced to the older man, who was looking after the girl with a face gone white and eyes full of misery.

"I suppose you're Adam Crail?" he said. "I'm Forman from the Milwaukee bank—you wrote us, asking someone to bring up those real-estate papers to go over with you."

Adam Crail nodded uncertainly, his mind obviously far away. "It's a great favor of you to bring them, Mr. Forman. I don't go to the city often now—I'm afraid to leave Sheila——"

Then he added, "You'll stay here while we go over the papers, of course. Do you mind telling me just where you picked up Sheila?"

The bulky Teutonic farmer stuck his head forward and asked Dick hoarsely, "Was she on Lightning Hill when you met her?

"Lightning Hill?" repeated Dick puzzled.

Crail told Dick, "This is John Burger, the hand who runs the farm for me. By Lightning Hill he means that dome-shaped hill a half-mile down the road. It's always been called that because during storms the lightning seems to strike there more often than anywhere else."

"It certainly was striking there tonight—I never saw anything like it," Dick declared. "I saw your niece up there, dancing amid the lightning strokes, and I ran up and got her away before she was hit by a bolt."

"*She* hit?" said Burger incredulously. He spat. "Not she—she is a lightning witch. She loves the lightning and it loves her."

CRAIL uttered a groan. "Now don't start that again, Burger. Mr. Forman has no desire to hear such stories."

"It's true!" declared the German farmer vehemently. "There are things I have read about—elementals—creatures of fire and wind and water and lightning, that are living even though they do not have bodies of matter. It is such a thing, the elemental of lightning, that meets the girl. Since she was

a little girl, she has loved the lightning. Time after time she would sneak away to Lightning Hill when there was storm, and laugh and clap her hands as the bolts struck around her. And now that she has grown, the lightning elemental he comes there to meet her in storm. Twice in the last year have I seen them, the girl and the shining lightning creature, dancing together up there!"

Burger's heavy face was working as he pointed toward the low, domed hill, humped black against the cloudy night sky.

"Twice have my own eyes seen them there!" he repeated. "And each time I fled lest the lightning creature strike me down from jealousy as he did the others."

"As he did the others?" repeated Dick Forman keenly. "What do you mean by that? Sheila said something——"

"It's just an unfortunate set of coincidences," began Crail, but Burger interrupted excitedly.

"Coincidences? Listen, and judge for yourself. A boy named Wilson, from a near-by farm, fell in love with Sheila and came here many nights to see her.

"Then once when he walked home during a little storm, he was struck dead by lightning. They found his body in the road the next morning.

"A few months later another young neighbor of ours, Jan Reeves, also fell in love with her. He also started to come here nights, though Sheila did not want him to. And one night, as they stood together on the porch, a bolt of awful lightning hit from the sky and killed him—without hurting her in the slightest. Yes, the lightning elemental that loves her is jealous, and kills any other who would be her lover."

Dick felt a slight chill. He looked toward Crail, who said hastily:

"It's true that both of those young men were killed by lightning. But we have a great many electrical storms in these hills—their deaths were just accident."

"Accident? No!" exclaimed the German, breathing heavily. He pointed a thick finger at Dick. "If you are wise, you will keep away from Lightning Hill after this. And from that girl."

He stalked off without another word. Dick looked after him, then turned at Crail's anxious voice.

The elderly man was saying worriedly, "I wouldn't pay too much attention to Burger. Like a lot of the other natives around here, he has strong superstitions——"

He shook his gray head wearily, and then said, "You can stay here a few days, can't you, Mr. Forman? That will give me a chance to straighten out all my business without having to leave here."

Dick stayed. He told himself at first that it was only to take care of Crail's business, but very soon he had to admit to himself that that was not true. It was Sheila who was keeping him here day after day. He had fallen in love with her, and he knew it.

There was an untamed quality in her that drew him, a lithe, swift shyness of the wild. He tried to be near her as often as possible, but the girl avoided him, murmuring only a word in answer to his earnest attempts at conversation, slipping away after meals.

He told himself that he was a fool. And then he told himself that he was no fool at all. For Dick knew more strongly with each passing day how much he had come to love this girl, and he was resolved to tell her. Yet Sheila

gave him no opportunity, evading him as elusively as a shadow, seeming afraid of proximity to him.

It hurt Dick, at first. And then he began to understand. For he saw that John Burger was uneasy whenever he saw the young man and girl together. The stolid German had something of dread in his face whenever he came upon them together. And there was nervousness in Adam Crail's thin face too, at such times.

Dick understood, then. The two young men who had previously paid court to Sheila had died—by lightning. And they were afraid that he would die the same way. Burger was superstitiously convinced, and Crail was at least badly worried, though he tried to conceal the fact.

And Sheila too, he thought, must be avoiding him for the same reason. With her fanciful belief in the thing she called the Lord of Lightning, she must be utterly convinced that proximity to her would mean his death.

"The poor kid!" muttered Dick to himself. "No wonder she believes such stuff, living out here in this God-forsaken, superstitious place."

THAT night, he grasped Sheila's wrist when she started to slip off the porch as he went out. She turned, startled.

"Sheila, have you been avoiding me because you're afraid that *I* would get hit by lightning?" he demanded.

Her violet eyes went wide with terror, her face paled.

"Yes," she whispered. And then her words came with a rush. "Oh, Dick, it's true! If you stay near me, sooner or later you will be killed by the jealousy of the Lord of Lightning, just as those others were killed. I did not love them—yet they died."

"Sheila, listen," he said earnestly, prisoning her hands. "I love you. I want to marry you. Will you—do you care enough for me to do it? I'll take you out of these dark hills," he continued eagerly. "To towns, and lights, and people, where you can forget all this fantastic nonsense."

"No, no!" she gasped, straining away from him, her face white and deathly. "It would mean death for you, Dick. I know you don't believe it, but it would—and I couldn't stand that."

"You do love me then?" he cried exultantly, his arms going around her. "You do care?"

Sheila's violet eyes were suddenly dark and dim with tears. "Yes, I do. Dick, until you came I had never loved anyone but the Lightning Lord, so bright and splendid and terrible in his power. I—I promised myself to him, that I would become his, would be his bride. But since you came, Dick, I have felt differently. I would give my soul to be with you always, if it were only possible."

"It *is* possible!" cried Dick jubilantly.

And he was suddenly kissing her tear-wet face, his arms tightening yearningly around her quivering slimness.

Sheila's lips clung a moment to his, wildly sweet. But then she drew back, and in the darkness her eyes were wide, dark pools of terror.

"No, Dick—no! I am promised—to Him. And He will surely kill you if you stay near me. You must go away."

"I am, and you're going with me," he told her firmly. "You won't be afraid once you're away from here, Sheila."

"It will do us no good to run away," she moaned. "He can follow us anywhere."

"Nonsense!" he told her. "Sheila, we're going in and tell your uncle now—about us."

Adam Crail was inside with the German when Dick went in with his arm around the quivering girl.

"We're going to be married," he said happily.

"My God!" exclaimed Crail, his face paling.

"I know it's pretty sudden," Dick hastened to add, "but we love each other and that's all there is to it."

"You marry death itself!" cried Burger, his square face working. "How long, think you, will it be after your marriage before a lightning bolt blasts you?"

"Shut up that talk," Dick snapped angrily. "It's superstitious maunderings like yours that have made Sheila believe in such nonsense. She's not going to hear any more of it."

He turned to Crail. "Have we your permission?"

Crail looked with strange dread on his face at his niece. "If—if Sheila is willing to marry you, I shall not try to stop you."

Sheila remained mute, clinging fearfully to Dick. Burger looked at her accusingly as he stalked out of the room.

That night a storm came across the hills, as Dick was preparing to retire in his bedroom. He heard the rumbling crash of distant thunder, growing louder and louder. Going to the window, he watched the distant flare of the lightning above the dark hills.

The storm grew in volume, and seemed to converge toward the black, domed summit of Lightning Hill. As Dick watched, he saw one bolt after another clang down and strike the hilltop.

He wondered why that spot was so favored by the lightning. Then sudden anxiety for Sheila's state of mind made him go along the dark hall to her door.

His knock could not be heard in the crashing thunder, so he opened the door. Sheila was standing by her window, peering tensely at the distant hill. He saw that her slim figure was as tautly strung as a bow, and was quivering wildly. With quick strides he reached her side and put his arm protectively around her.

She turned almost wildly. Now a continuous drumfire of blinding lightning was striking out there on the domed hill.

"Dick, He is out there—expecting me!" she cried, pointing at the firebranded hilltop.

"You just imagine it, Sheila," he said soothingly. "Forget all about it and go to bed."

"No, He is there—and is angry because I am not there!" she exclaimed.

Dick saw that in fact the electrical storm had become hellish over Lightning Hill. The continuous crash of thunder was nerve-shattering. Then he noticed that the storm was beginning to move from the hill in the direction of the house.

"He is coming!" cried Sheila wildly. "The Lord of Lightning is angry that I am not there, and comes to search for me."

"Nonsense!" Dick repeated, but his throat felt dry and his nerves were tingling with strange fear.

He could see terrific bolts hitting now out in the farm yard. A wagon was smashed to charred flinders, a shed roof was ripped off, two tall pines were smashed to earth as though by a giant hand.

The impacts of thunder seemed the raging voice of an invisible giant stalking about the huddling house. In the brief intervals of comparative silence, Dick could hear the wild screaming of wind and rain and faint cries of terror

from Burger. The hair was bristling strangely on the young man's neck.

"He searches!" moaned Sheila. "Dick, let me go out to Him before He destroys you all."

"No!" Dick rasped. "It's all imagination——"

Suddenly, with almost inconceivable swiftness, Sheila flung herself between Dick and the window.

At the same instant, it seemed, the world was lit by a terrific bolt of lightning that seemed to have lanced straight down at the window and then to have curved *away* from it. The house shook crazily to the explosion of thunder that followed on its heels.

"Stay back from the window!" Sheila cried, dragging him frantically back. "He would have killed you that time, had I not thrown myself in front of you."

"It—it was just a freak bolt," Dick said hoarsely.

The storm was raging onward, leaving the house and ravening madly across the hills, leveling giant trees and smashing down poles and fences and sheds with superhuman fury.

Sheila sobbed against Dick's breast.

"He has marked you for death, Dick. Another time, were you away from me only a few steps, I could not save you."

He tried to soothe her as the thunderous storm raged away in the distance.

"Don't cry, Sheila. There is no danger to me."

Sheila did not seem to hear. Her white, agonized face was strange, and her voice, when she spoke, a whisper.

"There is only one way in which I could save you now, Dick. By going to Him as I promised to do, becoming His for always. Then He would no longer be jealous of you."

"Sheila, for God's sake, forget all this fantastic belief of yours," Dick groaned, his own nerves on edge. "Tomorrow I'm going to get you out of this storm-cursed place, if it's the last thing I do."

Over the distant rumbling of the angry thunder there were hurrying footsteps in the dark hall. Adam Crail came into the room, his thin countenance bloodless, his hands shaking. Over his shoulder peered the scared face of John Burger.

"Forman, are you all right?" gasped Crail. "I thought that one bolt had hit the house and——" He broke off, peered fearfully out the window at the raging night. He muttered, "That storm's circling back——"

"*Ja*, the Lightning Lord walks the hills in anger tonight!" cried Burger excitedly. "He will come back to destroy you, Forman—to destroy all of us but Sheila. I am going to get out of this house!"

"You won't need to get out of here," Dick said with savage contempt. "*We're* getting out—right now. I won't have Sheila staying in this atmosphere another minute."

He saw the half-suppressed look of relief on Crail's haggard face. Miles away, the ferocious storm was circling around, coming back across the hills, its thunderous raging growing louder again.

"You'll never get out of these hills alive with that girl!" cried Burger to Dick. The German's face was gray, his eyes bulging. "Listen to that storm! He is coming back—searching, and will kill you when he finds you with Sheila out there."

"Dick, it's *true!*" sobbed the girl, clinging wildly to him. "You're doomed if you go outside with me now! You're doomed anyway if you stay near me.

He comes—to claim my promise——"

"No more of this, Sheila," clipped Dick decisively. "You pack a bag and I'll get my own stuff together. If it's that storm that frightens you so much, we'll get out of here before it comes back over. Get moving!"

Sheila stood a moment, violet eyes great and dark in her white, terror-haunted face. Crail and the German had shrunk hastily, fearfully, back to their own rooms.

A tremulous smile appeared on Sheila's face. She suddenly flung warm arms around Dick's neck, her quivering face pressed against his cheek, her soft lips against his, blindly. Then:

"I—I will make ready, Dick," she said, and he hastened to the door.

"Be as quick as you can, Sheila."

IN HIS own room, Dick hastily gathered his belongings and threw them into his kit-bag. Now the wind was rising again to screaming pitch, rushing wildly through the groaning trees around the house like the madly racing outriders of a coming army. The hubbub of thunder was rising in volume.

He grabbed up the bag and ran down the hall to Sheila's room. The girl was not there. Cold fear clutched instantly at Dick's heart and he shouted frantically: "Sheila!"

There was no answer. He ran to the window. By the thin flare of distant lightning, he glimpsed a white figure flitting along the road toward the dark dome of Lightning Hill.

"Sheila!" he yelled wildly. He plunged down the stairs and out of the house.

He *knew* what Sheila intended. Believing that his life was doomed if she remained near him, she had gone blindly to be claimed by the lightning—to save him!

He was running along the road after that flitting, fleeing shape. Great winds were blowing through the trees, their shriek and the hiss of rain drowned by the crashing uproar of thunder. The storm was nearer.

Sheila was racing up the hill. As he started desperately up the slope after her, he saw the girl gain the summit. She stood poised, her sweet, slim body a white silhouette in the storm-torn darkness.

He saw her fling her arms high, in wild appeal. And on the instant, a mile away, the storm crashed forth a terrific yelling peal of thunder. The storm swept toward the hill with incredible speed, the screaming wind and hissing rain its forerunners. Down upon the hilltop swept the mad, fire-shot tempest, just as Dick struggled up to the edge of the flat summit.

Dick stopped, frozen by an awful vision. Sheila, standing there with arms upraised, and a hell of dancing white bolts of lightning striking all around her—lightning that curled around her slim, wild body, that split the rocks beside her feet, that darted and played and danced around her in a blinding halo of awful flashes.

Down through those dazzling death-bolts danced a coiling thing of intolerable light, a rocketing thing of superhuman splendor. With wild joyousness of shouting thunder and yelling wind, it sped down toward the girl.

Dick yelled hoarsely, plunged forward. But at that moment, from the coiling thing of light, smote unbearable bolts of white lightning that bathed Sheila in blinding radiance, that wrapped her in a robe of dazzling force. The hill rocked to the mad impact of world-shaking thunder, and Dick was thrown violently from his feet.

And when he staggered wildly to his knees, Sheila was gone. The storm was lifting from the hilltop, bellowing in superhuman jubilance. But now up there among the dancing flashes of lightning there moved *two* coiling things of light, moving off amid the wild music of the storm.

Dick tried to shout, and could not. He felt the earth cold against his face. And then he felt only darkness. . . .

PEOPLE often wonder why Dick Forman is not afraid of lightning. It seems queer, for everyone has heard how the girl he meant to marry was killed by lightning, destroyed so utterly that even her body was consumed and never found. They cannot understand why, after that, Dick should seem to like lightning. And he does, for let a storm come up and he must be out in it, no matter how terrible the lightning.

And there are those who have told of seeing him stand with upraised arms while lightning strikes and dances around him. It never seems to harm him, yet it seems strange to everyone that he should so love the lightning, that he should seek it, should even *talk* to it.

It would seem stranger still, if they knew what he was saying.

Othello Time

By VINCENT STARRETT

A swallow on a sun-dial rests;
Time passes, and he is gone . . .
There was a symbol bigger than the crests
Of mountains; more significant than dawn
Rising upon a world dew-hung in space;
Charged with a greater import than a clock
Suddenly stopped, its hands before its face,
Or a new island risen from the sea,
Or an old man, dying in mystery,
Or a new prophet for the world to mock.

Moments of happiness are mortal too . . .
Inarticulate, we smile, being less wise than birds,
Smug in our clouding belief that what we do,
And what we think and say—ideas—words—
Have power to defeat the strangler, Time,
Who smothers not alone our lexicons
But the immortal vanities of rime.
Clocks, mountains, islands, prophets, thus it follows,
Perish with the old dawns and speeding swallows,
Dials of granite base, and markers of bronze.

"The Spaniard screamed 'Kill' and the great brute charged."

I Found Cleopatra

By THOMAS P. KELLEY

A glamorous weird tale of romance and mystery, of the almost incredible fate that befell a young American who sought the tomb of the famous Egyptian Queen—by the author of "The Last Pharaoh"

The Story Thus Far

AN ANCIENT Egyptian scroll that tells where the body of the great Queen Cleopatra lies, "not dead, but sleeping," somewhere in the heart of the Sahara, has brought adventure to Brian O'Hara, hardy, two-fisted American lawyer. Gaining the enmity of Manuel De Costa by selling both the scroll and his services to a mysterious woman of breath-taking beauty, known only as The Midnight Lady, O'Hara is pitched overboard on his way to Dakar to meet his lovely employer, and after a series of wild exploits finds himself, together with The Midnight Lady, a captive of De Costa in the latter's mountain fortress, in the innermost depths of the Sahara.

O'Hara has lost the scroll, but tells of the three peaks it describes as the mountain where the tomb is hidden—a description instantly recognized by The Midnight Lady as the wild Three Sisters mountains.

Together they escape De Costa's stronghold, then later, at the head of

This story began in WEIRD TALES for November

a thousand followers, come to the jagged Three Sisters mountains, where, reclining on a tiny stone altar, far down in the heart of the central peak, they come upon a slender young girl in a death-like coma. The strange serum of his companion awakens the sleeper, and it is then, to his amazement, that O'Hara discovers The Midnight Lady to be none other than Cleopatra herself!

A few nights later, while the campfires burn low, the girl tells her strange story; that she is Na-Ela, a Tarkamite Princess, born in the weird underwater city of Lothar, two thousand years ago; of how she secretly journeyed to Alexandria to offer Cleopatra the sanctuary of her hidden city, only to find the last Ptolemaic ruler a captive of Octavius in the tower of Isis Lochias; of Cleopatra eating the fruit from the Tree of Life—a tree whose hidden whereabouts is known only by Na-Ela. And then at last of the great subterfuge of Baltarus, secret adviser to the Queen, who drugs and disguises Na-Ela as Cleopatra, then raises the cry that the Queen is dead, while in truth the Egyptian is in hiding at a near-by inn.

Na-Ela concludes with saying that two thousand years less thirty-six—the time limit of the fruit—has nearly passed, and if she does not soon eat of the Tree of Life again, Cleopatra will crumble to the dust that should have claimed her centuries ago. The time is nearly up.

Later, on the little island in the Enchanted Lake, together with two Tarkamite warriors, the three—Cleopatra, Na-Ela and O'Hara—don the glittering underwater helmets and begin a slow descent to the sunken city of Lothar.

The story continues:

Part III

13. Lothar

Yes, I, Brian O'Hara, in the year 1934, followed the great Queen Cleopatra down that rocky, submerged trail, while behind me came the mystic Tarkamite princess whose ancestors had ruled in the city far below us, seven thousand years ago!

Even now it seems like some wild figment of a dream, that slow and winding descent to the sunken halls of Lothar. The strange waterproof lantern of the leading man cast the brilliant light that enhanced the weirdness of our surrounding, and sent the golden vistas shooting into the gloom to show the occasional small fish whisking past like silvery streaks.

The trail was indeed a mountainous one. On both sides the flickering light revealed a drop that fell away to the gloom below, while the lengthy decline of the trail showed that its beginning could have been only from some lofty height. But where was the great pressure I expected? True, there was a somewhat firm constriction from the water, but it was by no means uncomfortable, nor did it continue to increase as we descended. I soon learned to disregard it entirely, though I never solved the secret of that mystery.

On we went, slowly, of course, for our cumbersome equipment must have totaled thirty pounds, and though the pathway underfoot had originally been a hard and rocky one, the passing ages since its submersion had covered its surface with a thick ooze, into which we sank ankle-deep at every step.

As we continued to descend, I became aware of the strange and gradual brightening of the water around us. From utter blackness it had given way to the dusky purple that was rapidly

changing to a dull, grayish white. And a few minutes later, when we had arrived at the base of the mountain, it had assumed the gray, spectral lightness I was destined to know so well.

Before us, in that cold, misty light, stretched a bleak and lonely landscape, visible for some two hundred yards in the clearness of the waters. Here and there rose thick masses of seaweed, above which floated clouds of tiny fish, and occasionally the strange gray and rounded little hillocks. But the plain on the whole was smooth and unbroken, and in another moment we had entered its broad expanse.

Across this dreary sweep we were plodding when I suddenly became aware of dark shadows flittering in the distance. Quickly they thickened into moving figures that soon closed the distance between us, and the next moment we were surrounded by a dozen warriors in the same glittering helmets as our own. A slender spear and the wicked-looking knife that hung from the belt of each were their only weapons, but in the hands of such powerful men they seemed adequate enough.

These were the Queen's personal bodyguards, who continued with us for the remainder of our journey. Nor was the caution and respect they showed in conducting their royal mistress merely a display. Later I was to see the entire twelve of them butchered, fighting to the last as they sought to save the Queen they loved.

Presently the towering outlines of a massive building showed in the water ahead, and shortly afterward we halted before a small doorway. We passed through it into a large, bare chamber, at the far end of which three steps led upward to a huge folding barrier. As we stood there two of the men worked the crank, and a thick sliding partition was drawn across the opening behind us, cutting off any retreat to the misty waters without.

No sound could reach us through the strange transparent helmets, but that a powerful pump was at work was evident by the rapid sinking of the water, and in less than five minutes we were standing on a sloppy, stone-flagged floor, busily removing our underwater equipment, which we hung on slender pegs protruding from the wall; nor was it many minutes till we had mounted the three steps at the far end of the room and were entering the great folding doors that had been flung open to us.

And so it was we came at last to the sunken city of Lothar.

WE ENTERED a hall of such gigantic size and barbaric splendor as to appear like some creation of a dream. Mighty pillars towered to a gilded ceiling, holding in their countless niches the flaming torches that served as both light and heat for the fast-dwindling Tarkamite race. Huge hieroglyphics and many other inscriptions, beautiful and perfect in their art, but weird and terrible in their subjects, adorned the great walls around us, while the steady puffs of air that issued from their numerous circular openings showed plainly that some gigantic air-making machine was at work.

But before us was that which commanded my immediate attention—the dark and almost naked people of this ancient, sunken city. Without exception the men wore loin-cloth and sandals of some scaly material similar to the apparel of the warrior who had rowed us to the island, as well as the strange turbans of an age-old Egyptian design; while the filmy skirts and

breast-plates of the slender black-haired women but added to their exotic features.

At the sight of their returning Queen the Tarkamites sent up a series of loud shouts and greetings that I readily understood, for they were yelled in Latin. I was to learn later that this was by no means unusual, as during the slow passing of the centuries, Cleopatra had demanded a teaching of that language till it had generally supplanted the mother tongue.

On reaching the far end of the hall we were ushered into a well-furnished and carpeted room. The guards had dismissed the crowd and closed the folding doors when their Queen spoke to me:

"You will follow Jurgo," she ordered, motioning to the man who had rowed us to the island. "He will take you to your quarters, and later bring you to the throne room where I will talk to you further. In the meantime, you are to speak to none other, nor vouchsafe the slightest information to anyone regarding the outside world."

I did not relish the idea of deserting the maid Na-Ela, and perhaps my reluctance was noticed in the hesitancy that caused Cleopatra to frown slightly. But the girl herself seemed unworried, and smiled the assurance that heartened me, and so in silence I followed my guide through numerous rooms till we came at last to a spacious chamber with gilded chairs and sloping sofas, where, despite the mystery and strangeness of my surroundings, I was soon lost in deep slumber.

WHEN I came to myself, I could not at first imagine where I was, nor had I the means of knowing how long I had slept. It might have been a minute, it might have been a year. There was no way to tell the passing of time in that undersea kingdom that knew no sun nor stars, no blackness of night nor beauty of dawn. For seven thousand years there had been only that weird phosphorous light that seemed to come from the gray ooze at the lake's bottom and brighten the water with a dim, misty radiance.

Within the great walls of the castle-city, the inevitable torches served to give both light and heat.

Around me were the large and windowless walls of my quarters, bearing innumerable hieroglyphics and tapestries—the latter hangings colored in many bright hues, and of a curious woven material. As I arose from my cot, the door was flung open, and following two attendants who brought food and the scanty garments of the underwater people, came Jurgo, the big man who had conducted me here. He gave a friendly smile.

"The Queen has said that you are to be brought to the throne room, in the apparel of one of her subjects," he spoke in a pleasant voice, pointing to the turban, loin-cloth and sandals held by the attendant. "I have been commanded also, to show you later the many wonders of our castle-city. Evidently you are to become one of us."

"It is not often, I take it, that a recruit is added to the forces of Lothar," I replied with an answering smile.

"Rarer than a glimpse of the sky above the waves," he answered, with a laugh. "I myself have been to the surface on three occasions, but as for any outsider entering the halls of Lothar—ah, if we are to take the words of the wise historian, Ecarg, you are the first to know this hidden kingdom since the great Queen herself came to us, nearly twenty centuries ago."

"But why do you not go to the surface

more often?" I asked, as I ate the meal before me—a delicious meal of tiny fish, hot rolls and a dark, warming fluid not unlike cocoa. "Surely it must be tiring to see only the gray plains of your sunken lands."

"To rise to the surface without the permission of the Queen is forbidden, and the punishment a terrible one. Of all our people, there are scarcely ten who have known the little mountain top above the waves, and then the stay is limited. I first won the great privilege when I saved the Queen from an assassin who even now lies in the black pits far below us. Then again I was allowed to travel to the peak above when I slew the mighty Khoda in combat, and became the Queen's guard.

"You yourself witnessed the third time, when I brought you from the mainland," he concluded, "nor was any of my other trips longer than the last."

The loud booming of a giant gong cut short whatever answer I might have given.

"Haste!" cried Jurgo. "It is the signal that summons us to the throne room. The great Queen demands our presence, and a sentence of twenty lashes is often given to the laggard."

Quickly donning the loin-cloth and turban, I followed my guide through large and numerous corridors, until we came at last to the great hall that was the throne room of Lothar. Here awaited perhaps five hundred others, but Jurgo forced his way forward till we stood in front of the massive jewel-inlaid seat on the raised dais before us, and presently from the depths of a passageway beyond the throne, Cleopatra strode majestically to the great chair.

But what a Cleopatra! Gone were the modern riding-breeches, the cork helmet and open-necked shirt, and in their stead were the garments of old Egypt—filmy four-slit skirt, golden breast-plates, and the cobra-ensigned head-band, similar to the raiment that might have been worn by this wondrous woman on those moonlit nights two thousands years ago, when she played with the hearts of Cæsar and Antony in the shadows of the Pyramids.

Standing before her massive throne, Cleopatra gazed upon her subjects.

"People of Lothar," came that musical voice. "For long have I ruled the ancient kingdom of the Tarkamites. During the slow passing of the many ages since first I entered its great halls, countless billions have come and gone on the lands above the waves, as well as the endless passing of mankind in the city we have here. Your sires, even your distant and remote ancestors who are now but dust—ah, have I not watched them grow old, and their children's children become ancient? And yet I now stand before you in that same ageless youth that I knew in those dim and distant days, two thousand years ago!"

In wide-eyed silence her people watched her.

"Many of your customs I have changed since I fled from my homeland. Many are the rebellions I have crushed. I have done away with the human sacrifices once offered to Kango, as well as that hideous stone idol itself. I have brought about the building of the great statues of Isis and Osiris that are erected in your temples. But of all those ancient laws, the effacement of the one that forbids the eating of the fruit from the Tree of Life—even though we know not its whereabouts—pleases me most."

A stout old man whose jewel-studded turban and proud features clearly stamped him as one of importance,

spoke from where he stood beside me:

"Ah, you have indeed done all that, oh Queen. The great wisdom of Cleopatra has shown itself down through the ages, as well as her undying beauty. But in truth, oh Royal One, though we would now gladly eat of the Tree—how may we, when we know not where it is?"

A low murmur of agreement ran through the assembly, and brought a faint smile to the perfect lips of Cleopatra.

"For once I find your wise tongue in error, Ecarg," she answered, "for we now have with us one who truly knows its location."

The old man gazed his astonishment. "The—the Tree of Life?" he gasped.

"I have said as much," went on the Queen. "Two outsiders have entered Lothar. One is the huge white man who stands before me. He comes from a distant new world, and will serve me as my guard. The other, however, the slender girl who now slumbers in her quarters, is by far the more important one. She is Na-Ela, the daughter of Na-Harus the Just, last King of the Tarkamites, who left these great halls with her sire, two thousand years ago!

"Can you realize what that means?" cried Cleopatra. "Do the last of you Tarkamites understand what the return of Na-Ela means to your fast-dying race? Have you not heard the many legends, and sung the songs of your ancestors that tell of the vanished Princess who knew where stood the Tree of Life?"

"She is the same Na-Ela?" roared a hundred voices. "The Princess the prophecies have said would return with the great secret?"

"The same!" cried Cleopatra. "The same Na-Ela I have sought through the ages. The same Na-Ela you have heard of in the legends of the ancients. I found her in the heart of a wild and distant mountain, and soon she will be summoned to this very room and commanded to tell her great secret—the secret that is known to her alone—the secret that men have sought and died for since the dawning."

Her voice rose higher:

"The secret whose knowledge means two thousand years of life, less thirty-six, for all of us!"

A WILD yell rang out from the assembly, and while the women shrieked and waved their arms, the knives of the men were drawn and lifted high above their heads in a barbaric salute.

Cleopatra was watching the cheering horde with wide and flashing eyes, while her shapely body shook with emotion. Presently she ordered the room cleared, and when the assembly, with continuous low bows and cheering, had withdrawn, turned once more toward me.

"They have been made happy by my words, Brian O'Hara, made happy by the thoughts of the great span of life that is so shortly to be given to them. Six days hence—that is six days as we of the upper world judge time—I have ordered the Princess Na-Ela to come to the throne room, where, before the people of Lothar, she must tell her great secret.

"So my people now show their happiness, but surely my own joy should exceed theirs. Even without the magic fruit, many of them are young and strong, and have years before them. But I have need of the wondrous powers of the fruit, and at once——"

Na-Ela had told me that same need, but I made no reference to it as I asked:

"And the great power of the fruit,

your Majesty—does it mean that for two thousand years more you will rule this small kingdom? That you will spend the many centuries in this tiny, watery world?"

"You speak with an ill-concealed scorn for my hidden city, Brian O'Hara," she answered laughingly, "but in the great joy of my new-found happiness I forgive you. Yet, you should not form your opinion so hastily. But wait till the guard, Jurgo, has shown you its many wonders, and you may think differently. You will see its huge halls, its vast temples and the great images of Horus, Bast and the other gods of old Egypt, not to mention a few of the still-standing deities of the more ancient Tarka, that were worshipped by naked men, ages before the erection of the Pyramids was conceived.

"Then again there is the treasure room—oh, what a wondrous treasure room, Brian O'Hara! Surely no kingdom can be considered unimportant when its vaults hold such gigantic riches. Some day I may show you that treasure. Some day I may take you to that subterranean vault, and let you behold the massive piles of gold and jewels whose dazzling radiance is almost blinding. Some day I may even——"

The voice of Cleopatra trailed off to silence. She was looking steadily at me, her dark and long-lashed eyes two deep pools of mystery. Around us was the vastness of the throne room, and its mighty towering pillars. Plainly I could see the perfect teeth her half-opened lips revealed. The delicate fragrance of her breath came gently to me.

What I might have said, what I might have done, I know not, but for that one instant at least the beauteous face of Cleopatra was close to mine. Yet even as I attempted some movement or reply, the booming of the giant gong came again, as the folding doors at the far end of the room were flung open.

The royal Egyptian turned and faced the score of men advancing toward us.

"Ah, my counselors!" she exclaimed in an impatient, tired tone. "They come always to me with their endless problems and worries—good men and wise ones no doubt, but at times I grow weary of them. You will leave us now, Brian O'Hara," she spoke to me, "and find the guard, Jurgo, who will show you the many wonders of Lothar. Later you may explore the plains and jungles without the city, that lie between us and the great wall.

"Yes, a mighty wall," she added, noticing my surprise, "a huge and mighty wall that towers a hundred feet above the muck of the lake, perhaps two miles from here, whose origin has long been shrouded in mystery. That wall was built ages before I came to Lothar, nor has it been allowed to fall to ruin. For centuries, with terror and an almost maniacal zeal, the people have labored to keep that wall in constant repair."

"But why?" I asked.

There seemed to be some terrible meaning in the words that were her answer:

"They fear what's on the other side of it!"

14. We Plan Escape

JUST without the throne room I found the waiting Jurgo.

"The great Queen has commanded that I show you our hidden city," he greeted; "an unusual duty, as I have never before seen one who did not know the many halls and winding corridors of old Lothar."

"A pleasant duty, let us hope."

"Very pleasant indeed, oh stranger," he answered, as we set off at a brisk gait toward a high arched door at the far end of the corridor. Several Tarkamites who lolled in the hallway gazed at me with unconcealed interest.

"It is not often that there comes a break in the monotonous routine of our lives. We younger men live but to guard our Queen and search the plains for the fish that are our principal food. With the elders it is different. They are kept busy testing and experimenting with the chemicals and strange herbs we find on the lake's wide floor, treating them in the various manners that produce our flour and other necessities, as well as to instruct us in the rites and customs of the temples, and teach us the hoary history of our ancestors.

"Yes, it is indeed an unusual duty," he added, "for no outsider enters Lothar, though occasionally we have the spoils of the looted caravans and other treasures of the outside world, that are left on the shores by the Queen's henchmen, to be transferred later to the little island and brought here by ourselves."

From room to room I followed my friendly guide, who kept up a continuous flow of explanations. At the end of a long passage that led downward until the floor level must have been a good hundred feet below the huge building, was the large room that contained the air-making apparatus and the numerous pumps that circulated it through the building—a work which had its beginning at the hands of that far-advanced and mysterious Tarkamite race, ages before the flood.

On we went through many halls and chambers, passing the huge kitchens and storehouses, the armories and helimite works—the latter that strange, strong and transparent metal from which the underwater helmets were constructed.

Of course the great temple and its towering, majestic gods of stone was by far the outstanding wonder of this city of many wonders—a gigantic hall of pillars, and a lofty gilded ceiling, that could easily have held ten thousand, whose enormous size gave mute proof as to the number of the Tarkamite race in the distant days of its erection.

As we continued our way, I recalled the words of Na-Ela that told how the Tarkamites had foreseen the deluge, and prepared for it. Everything in the construction of the great castle-city showed it had been built for the sole purpose of protecting its inhabitants from the inrush of the water, and making its huge interior an eternal ark of refuge.

In a narrow passageway just off the main corridor we came upon a dozen or more pigeons in a large mesh-like cage, while near by a number of smaller waterproof and transparent cages sparkled brightly. This brought a ready explanation from my companion;

"The messengers of Cleopatra—carrier pigeons. When the Queen wishes to journey to the outside world, or needs the aid of her white-robed warriors, one of these speedy birds is dispatched with the message that shortly brings the swarthy riders from their own near-by city. I have never been there, of course, nor do I know of anyone who has, but I have heard it is a strange little city of stone, where dwell the descendants of Cleopatra's original and long-disbanded army."

"Her original army?"

"None other," he went on. "When Cleopatra first came from Egypt, two thousand years ago, she brought with

her a small detachment of some four hundred soldiers—or at least our legends tell us that it was that number. But for some reason, the Egyptian warriors were unable to live in peace with the Tarkamites, as was their more tactful Queen. Countless quarrels arose, quarrels that threatened to end in a battle that could mean only the massacre of the Egyptians, for the Tarkamites numbered thousands then to their hundreds now. At last the wily Queen ordered her soldiers to leave Lothar and settle in some near-by spot, that they might be near to aid her, should she have further need of them.

"This her warriors did. A few miles from here they came upon a desert tribe with whom they made friends and tarried. There the descendants of that little band have remained to this day, waiting always for the white birds which bring them word of their sovereign. There the descendants of that little band, now a hardy and reckless lot, live for but one purpose—to serve and die for the dark-eyed Queen they love."

This then accounted for the un-Arabic features in the horsemen I had known, as well as their other strange characteristics. Though never quite certain as to their origin, I had long since decided that they were not merely another of the torture-loving desert tribes who inhabit the Sahara. I listened as my guide explained how the waterproof and transparent cages were used in carrying the birds to the little isle above the waves, before I asked:

"But suppose someone—let us say one of your own people—wanted to escape from this city. He could not hope to go far, naked and unmounted, in the great desert above the waves, it's true. But suppose he was to take one of the pigeons with him, and send a note for a horse and equipment, using the Queen's name?"

Jurgo smiled.

"A rash act, to be sure, and a foolish one also. None of us would dare attempt such a thing, and even if we wished to, it would be useless. The Queen sends her notes only in the hand of old Egypt, and in all the city of Lothar there is none other who writes that tongue."

SOME time later I was taken with Jurgo and several others for a journey on the lake's slimy bottom. We assembled in the same stone chamber into which we had formerly entered. It was a large, bare room, with its walls and ceilings green with marine growths, and dripping with moisture. On either side were the pegs from which hung the helmets we had left there.

It was not long till we had adjusted them, and were inside their strong, transparent coverings. Then, following the example of the others, I grasped one of the iron rings that hung at intervals on either side of the room. The reason of this was soon apparent, for as the sliding partition slowly opened, the water came pouring in with such a force that it would have swept us off our feet had it not been for that precaution. As it was, we were able to steady ourselves, and once the water had risen over our heads the pressure was eased. Jurgo led the way, and a moment later we were on the lake's floor once more.

Without were the same weird lightness and dreary, ooze-covered plains I had seen before, with nothing to remind one of the terrestrial life a half-mile above. For several hours we explored the plains around us, plodding ankle-deep into the soft slush at every step, so that it was a tired little band

of travelers who finally returned to the safety of Lothar's strong walls.

I noticed that at no time did the men enter the dreary sweep that lay to the north of the building, and once, when I attempted to take a few steps in that direction, several of them grasped my arms, and with wide-eyed, frightened glares motioned me to follow them, while they looked fearfully over the lonely plain.

In the quiet of my quarters I mentioned this to Jurgo.

"It was because they feared for you, man of the outer world. To the north of us lies the forbidden land, and this in turn leads to the great mountain whose lofty peak is known as the Island of Death.

"You are no Tarkamite, of course, or you would know all this," he explained. "The Island of Death is the most terrible place in all the world—the abode of the lost and the damned. When the wicked of our country depart this life, their souls are carried over the jagged mountain peaks of the Island of Death by other wicked spirits who have gone before them. It is said that if anyone approaches the island the terrible spirits will seize and compel him to become one of them. It is said that if one rises above the waves on a quiet night, he can hear the howls of those poor tortured souls who live a life of eternal damnation on that weird and haunted island."

I could not help a slight smile as I asked: "And you believe all this, Jurgo?"

The man stared at me. "Of course," he answered readily. "Has it not been taught to me? In all the world the only place no Tarkamite would dare go is the Island of Death."

I had the foresight not to discuss my own opinions regarding this Tarkamite version of Hades, nor did Jurgo press the matter further; but that the people of Lothar greatly feared the Island of Death was evident by the glares and silence that always occurred when its name was mentioned.

FIVE days passed—that is, five days as I would judge time—and the hour drew nearer when the Princess Na-Ela would be summoned to the throne room to divulge her great secret. During that time I had been escorted to the various parts of the huge building, and twice more accompanied Jurgo on his fishing expeditions to the lake's floor. I had heard no word from Na-Ela, however, but I knew the location of her quarters, and at length resolved to see her.

I chose the Hour of Prayer for my venture—a time when most of the people were in the great temple, and the corridors nearly deserted. No order had been given to me forbidding such an act, but as I knew it was an errand unlikely to arouse the pleasure of Cleopatra, I proceeded with caution.

A lofty passage led to a high arched door at the far end of the great building. On the several occasions I met with an advancing guard or attendant, it was an easy matter to slip behind one of the huge pillars till he passed. This was more a precaution than anything else, of course, as I had been given unrestricted liberty, and was not unlikely to be found in any part of the sunken city.

Before the door I halted; then, taking courage, I raised my fist and sent three knocks thudding into the room beyond.

The door was opened almost immediately. Never will I forget the unutterable relief and joy that shone on the pretty face of the girl before me.

"It is you!" exclaimed Na-Ela. "At last you have come, Brian O'Hara—you who I thought had forgotten me."

"There was little danger of that," I answered, entering the room and closing the door behind me. "Since we first entered Lothar I have sought to speak with you, but watchful guards made that impossible. Indeed, were it not that the Hour of Prayer draws its inmates to the temple, I doubt if I would have been able to reach you at all."

"It was a risk you should not have taken," said the girl, "though your presence is welcome. The Queen would frown on such a visit—she might even have you punished."

"But I could not leave you here alone."

"You must," she answered. "There is nothing you can do to help me. Within a few hours I am to be summoned to the throne room to reveal where the Tree of Life is hidden. My refusal means my death. That I realize and expect. But there is no reason why you should be involved. Any interruption on your part, or an attempt to aid me, means you will but share the fate that is certain to be mine."

"Then why not tell them where the Tree is?" I urged. "Why not save yourself and tell them?"

The girl looked steadily at me before she spoke. There was a splendid determination in her quiet voice.

"Two thousand years ago I refused to tell Cleopatra where the Tree of Life stands. In the tower of Isis Lochias on that far distant night, neither promises nor threats could force me, nor has time altered my decision. As I told her then, so shall I tell her in the throne room—that the location of the Tree of Life is a secret that the Kings and rulers of the Tarkamite race tell only to their kin."

"But you must think of yourself," I broke in. "Your loyalty to your ancestors is both grand and admirable, but you must think of your own safety. The people have been aroused by Cleopatra's promises, and seek the great span of life the fruit offers. Even if the Queen would spare you, the anger of the populace will mean your death. They will be blind to all reason in their rage and disappointment. Yes, Na-Ela, yes," I urged. "You must tell them and save yourself."

"And go into the hereafter with that black mark upon my soul? No, Brian O'Hara," she answered. "Death holds no terror for me. The promise that I gave my father is still a promise, though it was uttered centuries ago, and when I depart this life, be it now or a hundred years from now, no one can truthfully say that Na-Ela revealed the secret of her ancestors."

It was evident that further insistance would be lost on this resolute girl. Reason told me that, but at the same time another thought flashed to me—a wild, almost impossible thought, that must have been akin to madness; yet I was quick to act upon it.

"Princess Na-Ela, will you trust me?"

The girl looked her surprise.

"Trust me enough to forsake Lothar?" I went on. "Oh, I know they may sound like the words of a madman, but if you stay here your doom is certain. Your only hope lies in flight. Once we have reached the shores above us, the far-flung desert offers a million hiding-places, and in time we are certain to come upon the habitations of civilized men."

"To escape from Lothar!" she ejaculated. "Why, it's impossible, and the punishment for such an act is torture, sometimes death!"

"But is that not what we are trying to get away from—death?" I reminded. "As for escaping from Lothar, we do not know that it is impossible until we have tried it."

There was a long minute's silence while my words were weighed, and then the girl answered:

"I hardly know what to say. The thing we attempt is almost unheard of. Even if we were able to reach the shore above us, where can we possibly hope to go? The great desert holds many dangers, and we shall be without weapons."

"I don't know," I admitted ruefully. "It is possible we may travel for days without seeing anyone, even if we had provisions. But the hardships and dangers above the waves can be no worse than the immediate future is certain to be here. And there is always the chance that we may stumble on some caravan or expedition. Oh, if only I could write the tongue of Egypt!" I added. "It would bring horses, weapons and provisions to help us to the coast, as well as able guides who know the Sahara."

"But how?" began Na-Ela.

"The carrier pigeons," I answered, "the carrier pigeons of Cleopatra. In a near-by room are a score of small birds which fly with the messages of the Queen to the village where hundreds of warriors wait to do her bidding. It would be easy to take one with us and send an order for the warriors to dispatch horses and clothing to some spot where we could meet them. It should not be hard, as they would think the command came from Cleopatra herself; but alas! the Queen sends her messages only in Egyptian, and none other in Lothar writes that tongue, so that——"

"But *I* do!" broke in Na-Ela eagerly. "I write Egyptian. It was taught to me long ages ago, and I have not forgotten it."

I cannot remember my own answer in the joy of the moment, but almost immediately we were making bold plans to escape from Lothar. It was some minutes before they were concluded, but at last it was agreed that I should come for the girl when the great gong of Lothar again called the people to the Hour of Prayer. From there we would try to reach the little island, and then the mainland above us—taking one of the Queen's own pigeons, and releasing the feathered messenger with the missive that might bring guides and equipment to us. Beyond that we could but hope and trust in fate.

"As soon as they leave for the temple, then, I will come for you," I was saying presently. "It is immediately after the Hour of Prayer that you are to be taken to the throne room, but with any kind of luck we should be well on our way to freedom by that time. Be brave then, Princess Na-Ela. I will go now lest we be discovered together, but will return shortly to begin the adventure that may result in our escape and freedom."

As I left, Na-Ela's little hand had clung to my arm, and the memory of her perfect lips and smiling face was still with me as I entered my own quarters. The great venture we had planned was in the immediate future. Everything was to be risked on that one dash for freedom, with torture and death our reward if failure overtook us. But it was neither the thoughts of escape or punishment that erased all else from my mind, and came to claim me for its own with swift and startling certainty.

I loved Na-Ela! The grip of her fingers upon my arm had made clear what I long suspected, and I knew I loved the slender Princess who had

dwelt in the sunken halls of Lothar two thousand years before I saw the light of day!

15. A Break for Freedom

CLOTHED only in a loin-cloth and sandals I stole down the mighty, age-old corridor. Before me its far-reaching distance stretched away, to be lost in the torchlight. But no sentry showed, no challenge reached me, nor did there come a sound, other than my own light tread, to break that almost tomb-like silence. On either side great pillars towered to a gilded ceiling that had known ages ere Troy was founded.

The hours since I spoke with Na-Ela had been long and trying ones. During that while I talked with Jurgo and several others, and even assisted in some minor duties in the armory. Though I had watched their faces for some sign that might betray a knowledge of my impending flight, none came, nor was there anything to show that they were aware something was amiss; in fact all vigilance seemed lax in sunken Lothar that day, as its inhabitants talked and thought only of the centuries of perpetual youth that would shortly be theirs from the Tree of Life.

I had not deluded myself, however, with the idea that the escape would be easy. There was, I realized, a possible one chance in a hundred for its success. The main difficulty was the many angles. The whole venture comprised a series of smaller enterprises, each in itself a dangerous one.

To begin with, I strongly questioned our ability to gain the distant exit chamber and the misty waters beyond Lothar. Reaching the island above us and the mainland beyond would be another problem. Then as to the planned subterfuge: The probability of our message deceiving the Queen's warriors, and their providing us with horses, equipment and guiding us to civilization, was a remote one. No need for false hopes—the odds against us were enormous. But at least there was a chance; so scarcely had the great gong summoned the populace to the Hour of Prayer till I was leaving my own quarters, and our flight was under way.

Just off the main corridor I came to the little room where the feathered messengers of Cleopatra were kept. It was unguarded and I passed in. A few minutes were lost while I secured one of the birds and transferred it to a small waterproof cage, but they were not many. Presently I was at the girl's door once more, and an instant later the waiting Na-Ela was beside me.

The Tarkamite Princess had flung a light cloak over her shoulders, whose open folds revealed the golden breastplates and scanty garments of the slender girl within.

"They will come for me in a few minutes," was her first hurried whisper. "I heard the slaves talking together. The Queen has planned a gala holiday and hours of feasting. The people have been aroused to a frenzy of joy, and the drinking has already begun. It will mean considerable less time in the temple, and we must hasten if we hope to reach the exit chamber before the corridors swarm with shouting warriors."

"And the note?" I asked. "The message?"

"It is here," she answered, handing me a small wisp of paper as we hurried along. "It is written as you asked, and in the precise manner that is certain to be mistaken for the Queen's. It commands that a guide and two horses, together with equipment and weapons, be

sent at once to the shores of the Enchanted Lake, and serve without question the two who will present themselves."

"There is no reason why it should not deceive them," I answered, dropping the missive within the tiny cage I carried. "Never before has a false message been sent to them, and it was well known throughout their ranks that I was in the service of the Queen."

"But what of the two stationed at the exit chamber—the warriors who man the pumps?" she asked.

That very subject had given me considerable worry. No matter at what hour one left or entered Lothar, two sharp-eyed sentries were ever present in the exit chamber beyond the great doors, to work the pumps and question those who passed. At no time had they appeared over-friendly toward me, and I doubted that our departure would go unchallenged. Yet to tell this would be to alarm the girl, so my answering words were an assurance that I voiced rather than felt.

"It should not prove hard to get by them. They have seen me pass several times, and there is no reason why they should halt me now. As for your own presence, it is easily explained. We will tell them that the Queen has commanded that you are to release the pigeon that summons her warriors."

"Let us hope it will be as easy as that," she answered. "If we are allowed to proceed beyond the exit chamber we shall at least have overcome the first obstacle. It is faintly possible that some minutes might pass before they realize that we have fled, and all this should but add to our advantage. Perhaps we might—ah!"

We had been hurrying along the corridor as we talked, speaking only in whispers so that the slightest sound might be discernible. It was this precaution that now warned us. A sudden noise ahead had brought the exclamation from my companion—a dull, thudding sound, that needed no words to interpret its meaning—the tramping tread of marching men!

It was the girl who saved us. "The pillar!" she whispered, and in an instant we had glided behind a great column. The next, and a dozen men had issued from an intersecting pass and were in the corridor between us and freedom.

"The Queen's guards!" gasped Na-Ela. "But why are they not in the temple?"

THE question was soon answered. A short distance before us was the entrance to the throne room. To this the twelve men advanced; then, as though by some prearranged signal, they wheeled and faced the powerful young officer in command.

"Warriors of the Queen," spoke the latter as the eyes of the men looked into his, "you have been brought here at a time when all others pray in the temple, a time when no other than the trusted guards of Cleopatra may hear the commands of their sovereign. Know you then that as soon as the Royal One learns the whereabouts of the Tree of Life, you twelve will escort her to it, if it be anywhere within the halls of Lothar or our sunken land below the waves."

As one the twelve men nodded.

"If, however, it should prove to be in the world above us, you will still guard the Beauteous One. The Queen has commanded that we wait till the city sleeps, and then make our silent way to the land above the waves, taking with us the great riches of the treasure vault. There we shall journey with

her to the far-off countries she will visit and enjoy the many pleasures of the new worlds, together with the two thousand years of youth and vigor that the Tree of Life will give us."

"But what of our people here?" spoke one more bold than the rest. It was Jurgo.

"They must get along as best they can. The Tree of Life does not hold enough fruit for the entire city, nor do the people have need for the great riches within the vaults. But enough. Take your places inside the throne room and await the Queen. I go now to bring her to you. Remember also that these words are to be repeated to no one, and that my sharp knife is ever ready to sever the tongue of a traitor."

Those words told me the immediate plans of Cleopatra, the thoughts of one whose brilliant mind had lost none of its cruelty and cunning since those far distant days when she had sent her assassins to the temple of Artemis, to murder her own sister, Arsinoe, within the very walls of the sanctuary the latter had chosen for her haven. Once she obtained the wondrous fruit from the Tree of Life, Cleopatra planned to rob the treasure vaults of Lothar, and then flee to the outside world.

Yet even as I thought this I felt Na-Ela pluck at my sleeve.

"Come!" she whispered from where she stood behind me. "Back slowly and keep the pillar between you and them —but careful, for the love of the gods! A few paces to the rear of us is a seldom-used passage I remember as one that should lead to the exit chamber."

A stealthy retreat soon brought us to a narrow passage. It turned to the left, and again to the left, and then we found ourselves back in the main corridor once more. But now the throne room and the guards of Cleopatra were behind us, and at a distance. For a time at least luck seemed to be with us, and having assured the two warriors who worked the great pumps of the entrance chamber that all was in order, it was not long before we found ourselves on the lake's bottom once more.

Once there we hurried on as fast as the thick ooze and the resistance of the water would allow, but even then our best efforts were pitifully slow, so that it must have been a good half-hour before we arrived at the base of the mountain, and then another thirty minutes before its top was reached, and the clear sky showed above us.

Here we released the imprisoned pigeon after first securing our tiny missive to its leg, and watched that speedy messenger as he rose into the air, to disappear finally in the blueness of the north. Here we discarded our own bulky water helmets, and entered the little rowboat for that half-mile journey to the mainland. A mile or so on the water to the left rose the jagged peaks of the Island of Death.

ONCE the shore had been gained we could do nothing but await the results of our message—though every moment but added to our danger and helped to bring discovery that much nearer. Of course there was no tangible assurance that it would accomplish anything, but whatever else could be said about the white-robed riders, they most certainly were not laggards, and scarcely had an hour passed before a horseman had drawn up beside us. A slender thong was attached to the bridles of the two horses he led behind his own, on whose saddles were strapped the bulky bundles that were the clothing and supplies we needed.

The man looked at us with narrow, unfriendly eyes.

Na-Ela spoke to him in the Egyptian tongue they both understood. The rider answered her in a slow, drawling voice, and for several minutes they carried on an unintelligible conversation before the girl turned to me.

"He is suspicious of us," she said. "I have told him that the Queen wishes us to convey a message of great importance to the outside world, but it is evident that he does not believe me. He asked that we either return with him to his village where his chief may see us and decide, or else that we take him to the Queen so that he will know we are acting on her orders."

As he spoke, the man had swung from his horse and was watching us. He was a tall, dark fellow, black-haired, black-eyed and black-bearded, whose swarthy features seemed all the more fierce by the look of distrust that showed upon them—distrust that was rapidly changing to a scowling, savage fury. Over his shoulder was slung a long Arab rifle.

"Tell him we must hurry," I told Na-Ela. "Tell him we must mount and ride at once." But though the girl was quick to do my bidding, the man gave no sign of complying with the order.

Plainly it was time for our departure. Helping Na-Ela into her saddle I swung into my own, hoping the bearded one would follow the example. His response was to seize my horse's bridle, and at the same instant there came that interruption which sent the eyes of the three of us over the waters to the left.

There on the little island we had left behind us were a dozen or more shouting, running figures. Despite the distance that separated us, their yells rang out loudly over the blueness of the Enchanted Lake. Even as we watched, several of them plunged into the water, and with powerful strokes forged steadily toward us, while the remainder sent up a series of high-pitched wails and curses.

The game was up. Although unable to understand the words, the bearded rider had seen enough to realize we were escaping. Though he was still unmounted we could not hope to gain anything in a sudden flight. The man would have picked us both off with his rifle before we had gone a hundred yards.

There was but one chance, and I took it.

As the swarthy rider wheeled about and faced us, and his hands made a frantic effort to swing his rifle to the front, I lunged from my saddle toward him in an effort that sent us both tumbling to the sand.

For one to whom rifle and dagger had been his only mode of fighting, the man put up a furious struggle; but even then it could scarcely have been two minutes from the time it began till I was again mounting into the saddle, while behind me lay the limp and bleeding body of the rider. From the island we could still hear the shouts of the Queen's warriors.

But they were soon lost to the speed of our horses as we thundered toward the north.

By following that direction closely I knew eventually we were bound to come upon some far-flung outpost or friendly caravan. Not that I expected this to be a matter of a few miles or minutes.

Knowing the very vastness of the Sahara, I realized the many days that could lie between us and rescue—long and terrible days perhaps, during which many things might happen.

Of course there was always that foremost worry—that the Queen would dispatch a message for her riders, who

might even now be upon our trail. Weaponless, save for a single rifle, we could not offer any great resistance, nor could we hope to hold our own in flight against those trained desert riders. Again and again I scanned the sands for some fluttering white column, but always my searching showed only the yellow wastes of solitude.

All that day and the next we rode toward the blue distances ahead. The Arab garments we had donned protected us against the blowing wind and sand, but they could not ward off that increasing fatigue, and on the second night, hungry and fagged, we paused for a few hours' rest beneath a small cluster of palms. Our meager supplies we used only sparingly, as we had no means of knowing when they could be replenished.

As Na-Ela slept I stood guard, and then toward dawn she arose to relieve me while I sought a few precious minutes of sleep. All during our flight the girl had aided me in every possible way, and it seemed I had scarcely closed my eyes before I heard her soft voice warning me of a new danger.

"Wake up, Brian," she was saying. "A great party of horsemen are in the distance, and traveling rapidly!"

Springing to my feet I followed the gesture of her arm. There on the far horizon was a large company of white-robed riders. In the clear Sahara dawn their fluttering garments and plunging steeds were easy to distinguish, and though they were traveling to the west of us and had soon disappeared from view, it needed no two chances to guess their identity.

"We must ride at once!" cried Na-Ela. "It is probably but one of many parties the Queen has sent to find us, and at any moment another company may be upon us!"

Hastily saddling our horses, we rode toward the north at as fast a speed as the failing strength of our steeds could command, but nightfall found us miles from the distant mountain range we were attempting to reach. For a few hours we rested, then having decided to push on in the cool of the darkness, took up our weary journey once more. In the blackness of the desert night we were comparatively safe from the eyes of our pursuers, though several times we heard the sound of distant gun-fire, and once the twinkle of a campfire showed in the darkness far off to the west.

Morning found us still several miles from the mountain range, and almost exhausted. It was around noon when we arrived at its rocky base, and almost immediately rode into a small encampment of Arabs, whose dozen or more tiny tents we had failed to see till we were upon them. Even as we attempted to turn, strong hands had grasped our bridles, and fierce, swarthy faces looked into ours.

In an instant we were being pulled from our horses, and bustled to the tent of their leader. I could hear Na-Ela struggling and crying my name, but held in the grip of six burly Arabs I was helpless, though I did manage to land several lusty blows that sent a crimson trickle down the chins of two of them, and caused another to howl with pain.

The uproar had brought the entire company pouring from their tents, to reveal a score of the most evil-looking cutthroats I had ever seen. With them came their chief, and had I formerly felt that death was likely, I now knew it was a certainty, for as the tall figure strode toward us, I recognized the narrow, sneering features of Manuel De Costa!

16. The Wolf Strikes Again

I HAVE seen wild rage and sullen anger manifest themselves on the features of many humans, but never before had I known such a black and indescribable hatred as that which showed on the thin face of the white-robed Spaniard who stood before me.

"And to what am I indebted for this unexpected honor?" he sneered. "A visit I know could hardly have been intentional on the part of Señor O'Hara.

"You will notice that I am many miles from my mountain city," he went on, "or is it possible that it does not surprise you? Yes, your charming associate and her tribesmen brought around its downfall, surprised and captured the stronghold my ancestors have held for over three centuries. But I am still alive. With all her boasted power, the mystery woman was unable to capture Manuel De Costa. Yes, 'The Wolf' still rides, and his heart is still bitter, and his vengeance still terrible to his enemies!"

All the while he spoke, the man's voice had been rising, even as his trembling form and quivering chin showed the terrible anger his words sought to belie. Then a sudden fury swept over him.

"What are you doing here, you swine?" he roared. "What brings you to the camp of Manuel De Costa? Hurry! find your tongue, or by the saints I'll have my warriors find it with the plucking-tongs!"

That the Arabs were quick to grasp his meaning was evident by the roar of approval that arose at the words.

"Let's come to the point, De Costa," I answered. "I am not going to tell you how I got here or where I came from, and you know it. Nor are you thinking of doing other than murdering me—of that I am fully aware. So it is only for the girl beside me that I ask mercy. She has had no part in anything that happened to you, nor did she assist in causing your downfall. Whatever you do to me you can chalk up to revenge, but to as much as harm a hair on her head would stamp you even lower than you are."

As I spoke, Manuel De Costa had brought his gaze to rest upon the girl beside me. What he saw was a slender, dark-eyed maid, whose disheveled hair and travel-stained garments could not conceal her youthful beauty. For a while he looked steadily at her, and when he turned again to me a look of cunning had replaced the one of anger.

"This is all very sudden. I must have a few minutes to decide what steps should be taken, and what liberties allowed. Have the goodness to be patient, then, as I wish to be fair in my decision as to the fate of both of you."

At a word from the Spaniard, Na-Ela and I were hurried to a near-by tent. There we were fed, and then, securely bound, were left lying on the bare sand within the tent, though just without the tiny opening we could see an armed Arab on guard in the doorway.

"What will they do to us?" Na-Ela whispered suddenly—a calm, even whisper, entirely devoid of fear. "I did not like the look of their leader, nor of any of them for that matter."

"It is difficult to say," I answered. "Neither he nor his followers are noted for their tenderness, but their methods in dealing with their captives vary. Of one thing we can be certain, however. We will soon know our fate. They were making preparations to ride as we rode in on them, and the arrival of two prisoners is not likely to halt their departure for any great while."

"You should not have done it, Brian —you should not have risked yourself to aid me," said the girl. "You would still be safe in the halls of Lothar had I refused to allow you to come with me. After all those hardships and struggles I find I have only postponed my death by a few hours, and have caused your own as well."

It was on my tongue to tell her why I had done it, and why I would continue to risk my life for her, but reason checked me. This was hardly the time for a declaration of love, especially one so hopeless as mine was bound to be, nor could it do otherwise than harass the girl still further.

SUCH were the thoughts that possessed me as we lay bound, side by side in that little goatskin tent. Ah, if I could have but seen into the future—but enough! Fate ordained that golden minute to go unheeded, nor was it ever to come again.

I was right, however, in prophesying that our fate would soon be decided. Several of the Arabs came into the little tent, and raising me to my feet, cut the bonds that held me. I was hustled through the small opening, and then to where the villainous De Costa stood with his remaining henchmen.

"I have been thinking many things in the past few moments, O'Hara," he began, "many things that have brought me to conclusions both strange and baffling. At first I was of the opinion that you and the maid had indeed found the tomb, and having stolen its treasures were fleeing from the vengeance of the beauteous one. Yes; I did think that at first, but as a search of your belongings has revealed neither jewels nor gold, I am ready to admit my error. It is plain to me that you have not yet reached the tomb, though I am equally certain that you know its location.

"So I would make this little bargain with you—a bargain that means a death both swift and terrible if it should meet with any refusal on your part. First, you will agree to tell me how I may find the hidden tomb and the treasures that are within. Yes; that is the primary clause, since its secret was the origin of all this suffering and bloodshed. It has come to me also that I have yet to see your vaunted physical powers. Second, therefore, you will agree to meet my strongest warrior in hand-to-hand combat. Those are my conditions, Señor. If you agree to the first, and survive the second, I promise to spare not only your own life and that of the maid, but will return your horses to you, and allow you to continue your journey unmolested.

"Unless it happens that your journey is taking you to the very tomb I seek," he added as an after-thought.

Of course what was a mystery to me then has since become quite clear. Although I thought that he had known the location of the tomb for weeks, I was to learn later that Manuel De Costa had never seen my ancient scroll on that night which saw me hurtling into the sea. A hasty search by the ship's officers had disclosed my absence but a few minutes after I had been pitched overboard, which resulted in the locking of my stateroom, pending an investigation, before the Spaniard had time to enter and search for the parchment.

But at that moment all this was unknown to me, although I would have unhesitatingly told the location of the tomb. There was no treasure there, nor had there ever been any. This, however, I felt that Manuel De Costa should find out for himself.

"And if I agree to your conditions, to tell you where you will find the tomb, and meet your warrior in combat? Do you then promise that both the girl and myself can go free?"

"I do."

"And what assurance have I, that having once complied with your conditions, you will keep your promise?"

De Costa flushed with anger. "My word as a Spanish gentleman is sufficient," he snapped.

This I knew to be a mighty thin assurance, but it was now neck or nothing, nor did I have any possible alternative. Again, there was nothing I could hope to lose in revealing the whereabouts of that distant mountain tomb.

"Agreed," I replied.

"A prompt and prudent decision," he commented. "This is indeed an interesting bargain, and as we are speaking in English, none of these fellows can understand us. Yes; I would prefer to have it that way. But now as to the location of the tomb——"

His dark eyes looked at me sharply.

"You have heard of the Three Sisters mountains?"

"I know of them," he answered. "Three wild and stony peaks, a hundred miles or so to the southeast."

Then in a slow and lengthy manner, I told what the parchment had to tell of the three strange mountain peaks; of the high peak in the center and the great rock at its summit; of the winding passage that led downward till it finally came to that ancient vault. I was careful to relate this in the halting manner of one trying to recall the words of the scroll, rather than that of an actual intruder to those halls of eternal night.

During the while I spoke, Manuel De Costa had withdrawn a note-book from the inner folds of his white robe, and had made a series of brief entries in its pages. When I had concluded, he closed and placed it back in his pocket.

"Very good," said he. "The first part of our agreement has been fulfilled, and I will take you at your word. We now come to the second part"—a faint smile played on the corner of his thin lips—"a moment I have long waited for. Follow me!"

With the Arabs at our heels I followed the Spaniard to a little tent some distance apart from the others. Manuel De Costa threw back the small entrance flap, then stepped to one side to permit me to precede him.

"An old acquaintance of yours, Señor," he murmured dryly.

Coming from the bright glare of the Sahara sun into the semi-darkness of the little tent, the sudden change was almost blinding. For a moment I could see only a reclining, massive form, a shaggy black outline, and the clanking of chains sounded from the gloom. A beast-like growl rumbled from the thing that was slowly rearing up before me. And then, as I paused and wondered, there came the stifling, terrible odor I had known that night on the liner—like that of some wild animal's cage gone uncleaned for weeks!

DURING the many ages since the dawning, Nature must have spawned its millions of frightful monstrosities, but I doubt if in all those centuries the pits of Hell itself ever produced the equal of the thing the fast-waning darkness was revealing to my eyes.

Standing up before me was a black, grime-covered body fully seven feet high, that would have weighed a good three hundred pounds. A fur-like hair completely covered what might have been the form of a gigantic, beast-like

Negro, were it not for the head and face. And there description ends. I will only say that if you can imagine the head of an enormous, coal-black, shaggy hound, upon the body I have described, together with the thick disheveled mane of a lion, you will have some conception of the awful thing that suddenly rose before me.

An iron collar encircled the huge neck, to which was attached a chain of large and rusty links—the far end fastened to a stake buried deep in the sand. The weird and blood-shot eyes of the beast-thing watched us unblinkingly.

"Zu-Tag," informed De Costa. "Zu-Tag the dog-man. I found him living in a cave in the heart of the Belgian Congo, nine years ago. On the whole, he is quiet enough, and kills only at my command. But I find it much better to keep him by himself and in chains, so as to safeguard against those rare occasions when he would run amuck.

"I had my men bring him to Tangier. Had you been on the docks the morning of the day our vessel sailed, you would have seen the huge box that was so carefully swung from the wharf to the ship's hold. Bribe money did the rest. He was to have killed you that night in your cabin, but for some reason he failed. Oh, he has regretted it, all right," said De Costa. "I punish failures."

"God!" I ejaculated. "He understands you!" For a look of interest appeared on the face of the beast-thing, whose shaggy head had suddenly cocked in a typical dog-like manner as it watched the Spaniard.

The man laughed.

"There can be no doubt about that, O'Hara He not only understands me, but knows what is expected of him also. Similar incidents in the past have taught him what to do. Well, this is your opponent, Señor. You will now step without and prepare yourself, while I release him. This death-fight cannot start too soon to please me. I yearn to see the muscles of the American battle with a worthy foe."

Nor was I destined to wait long. Five minutes later I stood in the center of the little clearing, surrounded by the Arabs, while at its far end two of their number were busy removing the iron collar from the neck of the beast-man. I had discarded my Arab garments, and now stood clothed only in the loincloth I had worn in the halls of sunken Lothar. A murmur of approval had risen from the watchers at the sight of my own rolling muscles, but to expect them to vanquish the shaggy form before me seemed hopeless.

The frenzy of impending battle that had swept through the excited watchers was now beginning to manifest itself on the beast-man. The great brute had started to whine in a quick, eager manner, while its little eyes appeared like fiery balls glaring wickedly at me.

"Zu-Tag is ready, Señor—are you?" shouted De Costa.

Was I ready? I cast a swift look at the merciless, jeering faces around me. Did it mean that the end was as near as all that? And when the beast-thing had killed me—what then? What would happen to Na-Ela? A chill came over me as I realized the probable fate of the little Tarkamite Princess—a plaything, perhaps, for the sneering Spaniard, or one of his equally villainous followers.

A groan escaped my lips. And then in a flash came a wave of assurance. That night on the liner—why, I had held my own against this thing. I had even done more than that! I had been

beating him—yes, I had been beating him badly till I had stumbled over that table, and Zu-Tag, glad to escape, had bolted through the door and fled! My spirits leaped at the memory. What I had done once, I could do again! Na-Ela might still be saved! At that instant I felt invincible.

"Ready?" De Costa repeated.

"Hell, yes!" I cried in a shout almost joyous.

At the same instant the Spaniard screamed the one word, "Kill!" and then the great brute charged!

As THE shaggy Zu-Tag thundered down upon me I had no time to plan any special defense, yet to meet that charge head-on would have been madness. And knowing this I did what appeared to be the only logical thing. As the hairy hands flew toward me, and those sharp teeth sought my throat, I ducked beneath the outstretched arms, and putting my weight behind the blow, drove a smashing left hook to the heart of the beast-man that not only stopped his rush, but brought an agonized "ugh!" from his lips.

In a flash my right fist whipped over to his jaw in a resounding crack, and then I leaped lightly to one side.

A startled gasp arose from the Arabs.

But the next instant their surprise must have changed to amazement, for I had sprung in on the beast-thing before it could set itself, and lashing out with left and right sent two fast blows that rocked the shaggy head and caused great crimson drops to mar those hideous, hound-like features.

The dog-man made a vicious sweep at me with his right hand—a blow that, had it landed, would have surely felled me. But swaying backward I was safe, as it whistled harmlessly past. Then once more charging forward, I sent another right that nearly finished him. For a moment it looked as if the beast-thing would go down. Only the roars of De Costa kept it to its feet. The next instant it had leaped blindly toward me, and we were in a savage clinch. Its great jaws found a hold upon my shoulder, while three sharp nails gashed down my cheek from the temple to the jaw, to inflict that terrible wound I must carry to the grave.

Together we fell to the desert sand. Dazed and half blind with blood, I threw out my hands for some grip on the beast-man, but now our locked bodies were whirling in such a blind, aimless manner that any effort to direct their course would have been useless. More by luck than by foresight I slipped from under his grasp, and the next instant the shaggy one was beneath me, my arms under his own and clasped around his powerful neck in a vise-like hold, the hammer-lock. Then, with muscles tensed and straining, I plied a downward, ever-increasing pressure.

Around us the watchers had closed in, until a score of yelling, half-crazed Arabs were bent over our struggling bodies. De Costa was screaming like a man deranged, while high above all rose the wails of the tortured beast-thing, struggling and straining wildly to dislodge me from my fatal hold.

But with the tenacity of a bulldog I was clinging to that death-grip. Lower and lower the head of the dog-man was forced upon his chest; higher, higher rose his shrieks. Blood and sweat poured down my face; that awful, beast-like smell was sickening; yet I dared not release my hold, or do other than increase that terrible pressure.

Twenty seconds—a half-minute—a minute. I could feel the muscles of my back and arms rise into great mounds

of destruction, and I threw the last ounce of the fine strength with which nature had endowed me into one mad effort. But not for long could I hope to keep up that effort. Tired and hungry before I had entered the fray, my many wounds and punishment had certainly not improved me. A red mist swam before my eyes. Only half conscious, I felt the boot of the hate-maddened De Costa crash against my head. Objects were starting to grow dim. God, those terrible half-human shrieks! And yet I must push—and torture and push! Death was the alternative!

How long had we fought?—hours maybe? How much longer must we continue to fight, and how much longer must I continue to strain and hear that awful screeching in my ears? Lord, what would I have given for a cigarette?

I was pushing, pushing, pushing—and then something snapped.

17. Dungeons of Terror

FAR out on the great Sahara, beneath its clear blue skies and flaming sun, death both swift and terrible had claimed a weird victim.

As the mighty Zu-Tag slumped forward on the sand, limp and lifeless, the silence was almost sepulchral. Around us, open-mouthed Arabs, as though unable to believe their eyes, were staring like so many gasping statues. The features of De Costa showed an amazement almost comical. It must have taken several minutes for the latter to realize fully what had happened—that the beast-thing was indeed dead, and I its torn and lacerated conqueror.

Then he turned to speak, but the words were never uttered. Even as the mouth of the Spaniard opened there came that terrible roar of musketry—a thundering, unexpected volley, that caused half of the Arabs to crumple to the sand, and wheeled the survivors in their tracks as they sought its meaning.

There on the near-by sand-hills, and completely surrounding the camp, was a great company of white-robed horsemen whose identity needed no introduction — the desert warriors of Cleopatra! So intent had the Arabs been on that death struggle, they had failed to notice the silent advance. Even as we watched, there came again the deadly fusillade that caused half of the remaining Arabs to topple backward, and sent hot lead whistling through the air.

Then with loud whoops the horsemen set spurs to their steeds, and sweeping down from the sand-hills in a wild charge, carried everything before them.

Terror and panic were instantaneous. The few Arabs still standing made a dash for their horses, but most of them were shot down before they could gain their saddles. A few did manage to mount, only to meet death as they sought to wheel and flee. From first to last it could not have been more than five minutes till the last of De Costa's followers lay dead, and that badly frightened murderer, together with Na-Ela and myself, securely bound and prisoners once more. Then the tents were burned, we were hustled to our horses, and the return journey to the Enchanted Lake had begun.

It is needless to detail that return journey. Two days later we arrived at the shores of the sky-blue lake. Here a dozen Tarkamite warriors, the guards of the Queen, awaited us, and we were transferred to the little island. Water helmets were then provided, and the journey down the mountainside be-

gan once more. Nor was it long till we had again entered sunken Lothar, and mid shouts and taunts of the Tarkamites were being hustled to the great throne room, where the infuriated Queen of Egypt awaited us.

INTO the mighty throne room of old Lothar we were hurried, and through the five hundred or more of its angry inhabitants. That our flight was well known was evident by the threats and attempted violence as the enraged Tarkamites sought to force themselves past our guards and reach us. Only the herculean efforts of the latter saved us, as their long spears continually beat back the many grasping hands. Joyous shouts, however, arose at the appearance of Na-Ela, shouts which plainly told that the populace still hoped to find the half-mythical Tree of Life.

But a silvery voice was reaching us.

"Bring them before me!" that voice was crying. "Bring them before me, that Cleopatra may mete out the vengeance for which the gods cry aloud!"

A moment later we were before the throne. Those wondrous eyes flashed to the terrorized Spaniard beside me, who was trembling in the strong grip of the guards.

"Silence!" she commanded to her shouting subjects, and in the immediate quiet that followed: "For you, Manuel De Costa, for you have ever preyed upon my warriors and sought my ruin, there can be but one punishment. Spy, thief, murderer! The just laws of Lothar have only one penalty —death!"

Even as a cry arose from the doomed man, the eyes of Cleopatra had sought and found mine.

"And how has Brian O'Hara sought to serve me? By what feeble protest or well-told lie will the traitorous American seek to escape my vengeance? None? Ah, but a silent tongue will not save you, nor by that can you hope to make lighter the penalty demanded. As a traitor you will suffer what our laws have decreed—the loss of both eyes, and a swift death to follow."

The infuriated Egyptian wheeled to Na-Ela. "The Daughter of Na-Harus knows well the punishment for one who would flee from Lothar," she went on, "nor is it needful that I remind her of the consequences that should follow her rash flight. But of her royal lineage I am also mindful, and if she will now tell the great secret her people would know, Cleopatra may not find it hard to forget the past."

The Tarkamite Princess drew herself up to her full height.

"My answer is well known to the Queen," she spoke coldly, "as indeed it was long before she asked it. Nor is it for my people alone that the Queen wishes the fruit from the Tree of Life. None knows better than Na-Ela, that at dawn, two days hence, two thousand years, less thirty-six, shall have passed, and that if by then she has not again eaten from the Tree of Life, the first sparkling sun-rays will crumble Cleopatra to dust!"

Then, with a toss of her head: "Nay, Queen of Egypt. Na-Ela will tell neither you, nor these cowardly descendants of a once noble race, where stands the great tree!"

A roar of rage rang out from the Tarkamites, that rose to the gilded ceiling high above. Around us were our scowling guards, and the fierce, white-bearded faces of the ancients; behind them the savage shouts and gesticulations of the others. Cleopatra stood, a glorious statue of despair, her long fingers clenched, her dark eyes flashing, her magnificent body clad in a barbaric,

bejeweled attire and trembling with thwarted rage.

"Let us kill them all!" came the fierce shout of an old man standing near by. "Warriors of Lothar, tear asunder these three who would dare defy your ruler!"

"No!" cried the Queen. "No, not the maid—at least not now. With a little more time she may think differently.

"Return her to her quarters for the present. I have still two days to loosen a stubborn tongue. As for the others: Guards, to the pits with the prisoners," she commanded. "The Spaniard is to be slain immediately. Then, having blinded him, you are to do likewise with the traitorous one."

But even as a dozen hands seized me, Na-Ela gave a cry and was at my side.

"No! No, you dare not!" she turned to the Queen. "He is no traitor. His heart has not been false to Lothar. Why, it was he who even urged me to tell the great secret."

"And prevailed upon you to accompany him in flight," answered the other. "Nay, to the pits with him."

"But wait, oh Queen," purred the soft voice of old Ecarg, the royal adviser, from where he stood beside me. "Let us not be hasty in our decision. Perhaps if you were to tell the great secret, my child," he went on to Na-Ela, "it might be that the great mercy of the Queen could be prevailed upon to waive the death sentence of your—er—friend.

"Do not forget, also," he added after a pause, "the great help it would be to your dying race, which in time would again become the mighty, powerful nation it was in the long ago. There have been many changes in the past two thousand years, Na-Ela, and were your good father but here now, his would be the first tongue to urge you. Again it——"

"Don't trust him, Na-Ela," I broke in, for the narrow eyes of the royal adviser belied his soft words. "Once you have told them the secret they will slay you also."

"Silence that traitor!" cried the Queen, and in a moment a thick gag had been thrust into my mouth. Then, securely held from behind, I could but mutely look on at what was occurring before me.

"But I cannot tell," wailed Na-Ela. "I dare not——"

"He will die if you don't," went on Ecarg, nodding toward me. "He will be tortured; then he will die."

Na-Ela turned to the Queen. "If I do—if I tell the great secret—you will not have him harmed?"

"He will not die," spoke Cleopatra coldly.

"As he surely will if you refuse," added Ecarg.

For a long minute the Tarkamite Princess stood with closed eyes, her face showing mental anguish, while a death-like stillness settled on the throne room of Lothar. I doubt, during that interval, if any of its barbaric assembly as much as breathed. Then a resigned sigh told the surrender of Na-Ela.

"The Tree of Life," she spoke in a dull, hollow tone that seemed a million miles away. "The Tree of Life stands alone in the center of the little valley on the—on the Island of Death!"

HELD in the powerful hands of Cleopatra's guards, Manuel De Costa and I were hustled down a long corridor that finally ended at the gaping mouth of a subterranean passage. Into this we were led, to continue down

a steeper, evidently much older, stone corridor, that led down and down in a winding, serpentine manner, till it was evident that we were being taken into the very bowels of the earth, far below the lake's bottom. A raw dampness told of our great depth.

Presently we were halted by a massive wooden door, secured with iron bars upon the side of our approach. This the leading guardsman released and swung open, and with lighted torch to show the way, entered the gloomy, jagged, low-ceilinged and far-reaching dungeon, in which the Spaniard and I had been sentenced to spend the remainder of our lives.

As Na-Ela had forced from her lips the words that told of the hidden valley where stood the Tree of Life, a gasp, then a groan, rose from her five hundred or more listeners; for of all places, either above or below the waves of the Enchanted Lake, the only one where no true Tarkamite would dare go was the Island of Death. That they feared that weird and high-peaked isle, and admitted surrender, was evident by the resigned stillness that followed.

But Cleopatra—ah, that was an entirely different matter. Well I knew that no superstition or danger could ever hold back that fearless beauty. Neither by look nor words had the tactful Egyptian betrayed her own feelings, and whatever thoughts were racing through that brilliant and dangerous mind no man will ever know, as she gave the orders that returned Na-Ela to her quarters, and sent De Costa and me to the dungeons for life. But it took no two chances to guess her immediate design. By fair means or foul, I knew Cleopatra would at least attempt to reach that forbidden isle, and find the wondrous tree its high peaks had hidden from the world since the dawn of history.

THE floor of the dungeon was covered with a hard, damp sand. Tiny, furry things scurried just beyond the torchlight as we entered. On either side massive iron rings were set in the stone walls. To these were fastened heavy chains, and at the far end of several of the chains were the attached forms of whitened skeletons. The leading guardsman swung his torch so as to light every corner of that dreary place, and reveal the gaping blackness of the large opening at its far end.

"The Dungeon of Terror," he spoke in a forced, lifeless tone, in which I could also detect fear. "The dungeon into which so many prisoners have entered. The dungeon from which no prisoner has ever returned. It is to this terrible place that we take the captives of the Queen, whom we feed at regular intervals. Some live to taste but a single meal, others to eat a score or more, but in the end it is always the same. The jailer returns to find only a gory mass of white and crimson, and sometimes hears a heavy flapping, like that of giant, wet flippers, hurrying into the blackness beyond."

All the while he spoke, the others had been busy securing the Spaniard and me to the walls, nor was it long till a heavy chain encircled each of our ankles, and the huge padlocks had been snapped shut.

"Whatever it is, it comes from there," went on the guard, pointing to the blackness of the large opening at the far end of the dungeon. "A hairy, dripping, cunning thing. It may wait but a minute, it may wait many hours till it rises from the cavernous depths to claim its prey. None of us has seen it, but description is hardly necessary.

Chances are that before long you will know much more about it than I."

A moment later they had gone, taking the torch with them, and Manuel De Costa and I were left to lie in the impenetrable darkness of the Dungeon of Terror, that had been decreed as our prison till death should release us.

For several hours its awful silence was broken only by the whispers of its two prisoners. Ah, how the darkness and the unknown can play havoc with the imagination! Even though the words that reached me came from an enemy and a murderer, at least they came from a human, and I welcomed them. Of course in the minds of both of us was that same dread—the words of the guard which told of the thing that came from the gloom—and our ears were constantly strained for the flapping sounds that would herald its approach. But even then exhaustion and an outraged nature exacted its toll, and a heavy slumber came at last to claim me.

IT WAS the glare of a torch that aroused me, and I opened my eyes to behold a grizzled old Tarkamite warrior, who held a light in one hand and carried two stone plates in the other.

"Still alive?" he asked, setting the food beside us. "Ah, well, I often have to feed them a score of times or more before they disappear."

He stood up, watching us. "And perhaps you're just as well off here as in the halls above," he added. "A great unrest has come upon Lothar. The Queen who once was loved has fallen from favor, and with every passing moment the angry murmuring grows louder."

"What has brought around the sudden change?" I asked.

"The actions of Cleopatra," came his prompt answer. "The inhabitants have been aroused to a mighty anger at the ease with which the Queen would throw aside the century-old traditions of our country, and enter the Isle of Death, which she plans to do ere dawn comes again to the world above the waves. Whispers have it also that once she has eaten of the fruit, the Royal One will flee from Lothar, taking with her the fabulous wealth of its treasure vaults.

"Ah, yes," he concluded, "Lothar is indeed divided, and ere long blood shall flow and sharp knives cross. Shouts have even risen from the rebel quarters that Cleopatra be slain, and Na-Ela, a true Tarkamite Princess, returned to her rightful throne."

This was a surprise. That an uprising should occur against the haughty Egyptian was the last thing I would have thought of. The words and commands of the great Queen had always gone unquestioned—a supremacy, I knew, that could be traced to fear rather than love. And yet a defiance to the traditions of old Lothar might have brought revolution at last, and aroused the long-smoldering hatred of the Tarkamites.

Several hours later I was still pondering over the man's words when the voice of De Costa called to me through the darkness.

"What do you make of it all, O'Hara? Do you think the jailer was lying?"

"There is no reason why he should," I answered. "What could he hope to gain by deceiving us, who can neither aid the rebels, nor those still loyal to the Queen?"

The Spaniard digested this for a minute or so, then continued: "But could it not in some way aid us? Let

us say that there is a revolution and it is successful. Might not the rebel leaders show clemency by releasing from the dungeons all those the Queen had sent there?"

But I failed to see how any rebellion, whether successful or not, could be expected to help us. By my dash for freedom I had broken a law that had been long before Cleopatra came to Lothar, and one that was punishable by death. Only through the intercession of Na-Ela, and her telling of the great secret, had my sentence been changed to life in the pits. A new government could not be expected to alter that or show any kindness to the Spaniard, whose followers for years had harassed the caravans bringing supplies from the outside world.

I had not voiced my thoughts, but apparently silence did not discourage the other, who went on after a pause:

"You can never tell. We might yet be free. Ah, but fate works in a strange manner. I recall once when I was a prisoner in far-off Afghanistan. It was only twelve hours before——"

The voice of De Costa had stopped as though a strong hand had suddenly been clasped over his mouth. The next instant I knew the reason. Around us was an impenetrable blackness, and through it, at a distance, a sound had reached him. As we listened it grew louder—a wet, flapping sound, steadily increasing. There could be no doubt about it. From beyond the opening we had seen at the far end of the dungeon, some great thing or giant body was coming toward us in a grim, soulless advance.

Now it had reached the entrance to the opening—though the terrible darkness blinded sight, our ears told us that. A loud, steady panting came from the blackness, as with pounding hearts and straining eyes we awaited the unknown. There was a moment's pause we could not account for; then came a struggling, swishing sound, as though a huge, moist body was forcing itself through the large rocky opening. The next moment it ended. The thing was inside the dungeon!

Manuel De Costa gave a scream that was almost inhuman.

"It's coming! It's coming!" he shrieked. "The thing from the darkness! Oh, Mother of Mercy—it's coming to crush us to a gory mass!"

There came again a loud, wet flapping, as though powerful flippers were hurrying a huge wet body toward us.

The amazing chapters that bring this strange story to its conclusion will appear in next month's WEIRD TALES. We suggest that you reserve your copy at your magazine dealer's now.

And Thus I Knew

By DOROTHY AGARD ANSLEY

I looked into a midnight pool,
But there no face of mine I read,
Although I saw the drowning stars—
And thus I knew that I was dead!

The Silver Coffin

By ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON

A brief weird story about the frightful thing that was imprisoned in that strange metal coffin

"CAREFUL, sir!" the old man warned me. "Tread cautiously, for these old stairs are worn away and slippery here. And the tunnel itself is very low and narrow. 'Tis better so, of course, for 'tis less conspicuous. Only a couple of the cemetery men know that it's down here at all, sir, below the other vaults. And neither of them knows where it leads to, nor what lies down here in the old crypt."

He lifted his lantern. I saw a vast stone chamber ahead, the walls dank with moisture and covered with strange lichens that were like a pale leprosy over everything. The silence of death was about us as we stood there.

"Here we are, sir," the old man said. "Here's the spot where I've kept vigil all these years. How've I stood it? 'Tis a question I've often asked myself, sir. But I guess what we must do we'll find the strength to do, hard though it be. And then, ye see, I'm what ye might call *bred* to the thing. 'Twas me father's task before me, and he did it well! It makes a sort of tradition in the family, ye see, a legacy we daren't relinquish.

"There's my own son, sir. Paul (he's just turned twenty this year), he'll have to take me place down here in the crypt when I'm too old to carry on. He knows about it already, and he's resigned. But sometimes I can see the shadow of the future on his young face, and it troubles me, sir, troubles me more than I can say. But then he could be worse off, ye know. He'll have a sure job and good wages throughout his life, just as I've had, and all just for watchin' down here at night. In these evil times a man could be much worse off. The Holt trust fund takes care of the pay, guarantees it through all time. And as for a raise—why, bless ye, sir, I could ask for ten times the money I'm getting now, and there'd never be a question. Why don't I, then? Well, it's like I said, sir. I feel that this thing is a duty and not a job. Somehow even talking about more money for doing it seems—ye know, sir, I was about to say 'sacrilege'! Funny, isn't it? For the good Lord knows there's nothing sacred about this business. It savors more of the Other Place, if ye take my meaning!"

The shadows crawled like crippled rats about us.

"Ye see, sir," the croaking voice went on, "there must be always a guard down here. Someone has to watch, night after night, someone who has discretion and patience and—courage, if I do say it meself as shouldn't! Those were me father's virtues before me, and I've copied them as best I could. And ye know, sir, a man just wouldn't *last* down here unless he was fairly steady! Ye get the strangest thoughts

sometimes in the long hours before dawn, when there's no sound but the drip, drip of moisture from the old arches and that other sound that ye'll be hearing in just a moment, sir, that sound that hasn't ceased in half a century, and that may never cease until Judgment's trumpet sounds to end the horror along with all else.

"You understand, of course, that the Holts aren't just another family. They are the best, if ye know what I mean, sir. They're proud, and they've a right to be proud. They were nobility back in England, sir, and they've been noble folk here too, since Virginia was still a royal fief. There was General Ebenezer Holt, who fought beside Washington all through the Revolution, and Abijah Holt, him as was with Perry on Lake Erie, and—oh, a lot of others just as distinguished. The Holts are a mighty line, sir. Stiff-necked, some call them, but 'tis their blood that makes them so.

"And so, of course, this stain has to be kept a secret, at all costs. There's even some of the family that don't know; they have just heard that something queer was amiss. Only the 'Head' of each generation ever comes down in the vault, and then only on occasional inspection tours to be sure that all's well. Young Mr. Gerald Holt—though he's not so young by now, I reckon; time gets away from ye down here—Mr. Gerald had his hair turn gray at the temples the first time he saw the vault! So I guess I've naught to complain of, at that. I'm not touched personally by the thing, ye see. It's only objective horror to me, of course, just as 'twill be only objective to my son when I'm gone. But the horror that waits for each young Holt when he comes of age—why, it turns ye sick just thinking about it, sir!

"Of course, the whole secret has been well kept all these years. The Holts themselves own this cemetery. I'm supposed to be just one of the regular guards. I wear the uniform and I help out a bit at grave-digging and funerals now and then, so that there'll be no suspicion of me. 'Tis generally believed that I'm watching this place because of the silver casket. *That* would be a prize to robbers—now wouldn't it, sir?—although of course there's no danger of robbery now. 'Tis for quite a different purpose I watch down here from dusk till dawn, sir—not to keep something out, but to keep something *in,* if ye take my meaning!

"YE DIDN'T know about the silver coffin? Why, yes sir! It's the only one ever made, so far's I know. The old man ordered it made himself, in his will. He'd great faith in it, they say. Ye see, silver has always figured strong in the legends about Them, sir. Silver bullets was the only things potent against their unholy lives. And this, sir—this was a silver bullet seven feet long, welded into a solid mass! I've never seen a sight so amazing as that coffin was. I used to raise the pall sometimes at night and look at it. It'd make me feel safer to see that gleaming surface between me and the horror through long night watches. . . .

"They say, sir, 'twas old Andrew Holt himself who collected the silver that went into it. He was abroad for many years on his smuggling trips, and he picked up a lot of foreign stuff, candlesticks and vases and even silver crucifixes, they say, that he melted down into ingots. But thousands and thousands of silver dollars went into the ingots, too. They found a fortune in metal bricks in the old man's room when he died, hidden under a cloth.

That's how they knew the curse was on him, you see—by that and by the will he left, providing for the making of the coffin and for the preparation of this crypt and for the trust fund for perpetual care—which is me now, sir, and which was my father—Old Andrew's butler he was in his youth, you see—and which will be my son who comes after me. And his son, too, I suppose, unless the blight be lifted by then. . . .

" 'I shall rest quietly in a silver coffin,' my father told me Old Holt said in his will. 'There will be no need to fear, so long as there be no chink or rift in the metal. I have conned well the lore of these things, and I know. So it is my final prayer that no stake through the heart, no mutilation or ceremonial wounding shall desecrate my body after it be interred. So let my unnatural enduring go on until the taint that is in me shall perish through lack of nourishment for its unholy life. For without the blood there surely must be eventually a death even for the Undying.'

"The Holts carried out his wishes to the letter. They built this vault for him and set my father to watch over him in his silver casket. And the years went by without incident of any kind. Throughout my father's lifetime Old Andrew's grave was just another grave by day; though God alone knows what went on down here during the long night watches. My father's hair turned white long before his time. But he lived to be more than seventy, sir, and died at last peacefully in his bed. The Holts had him buried in their own plot, and put a headstone at his grave that reads: 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant!' I shall sleep there beside him when my turn comes to go, Mr. Gerald tells me, 'for the debt my family owes to you and yours,' he says, 'can never be repaid.'

"He was referring, of course, to that business of a few years ago, when the horror sort of boiled over, you know. And it was me alone that first found out about it. Of course that's my job to watch for just such things. That's why I'm down here in the night. But strangely enough, 'twas not by being on duty in the vault that I learned about it. 'Twas by reading local newspapers at my home uptown, during the day!

"I DON'T know yet why I should have been so interested in those children and their mysterious 'disease.' Just a presentiment, I suppose. All my life I'd been fearful that such a thing might happen, even though the coffin seemed a safeguard. And after all those long years of safety! But I realized at once the significance of that epidemic that broke out among the poor wretched little brats in the Minsport tenements scarcely a mile away from here. 'Pernicious anemia' the doctors insisted it was. Child after child sickened and wasted away, their little bodies growing each day more pallid and bloodless and wan until finally death ended their sufferings. One—two—three—a dozen of them all taken the same way in so many days, or rather nights, crying out to their parents of queer, wild dreams, complaining of pains in their little throats each morning on awakening from troubled sleep; but dying, sir, slowly dying despite everything that science could do to save them! Wasting away to little cold corpses that were dumped like sacks into the Potter's Field in this very cemetery.

"God knows how long it had been going on before it came to my notice.

But when at last I knew, I went at once to Mr. Gerald with the story. 'It's come at last,' I told him 'The horror that we've been dreading all these years.' I showed him the items in the papers. 'You recognize the symptoms, sir?' I asked.

"For a moment I thought he was going to faint. It's no joke, sir, seeing a healthy man's face go white as marble and his breath cut off by sheer, overwhelming shock.

" 'But—but,' he stammered at last, 'it can't be true! It can't be! You've been there watching every night! You would have seen——'

"I shook my head. 'You don't see Them if they will it otherwise, sir!' I told him. 'That's what all the books I've ever read agree on. They come and go like ghosts; only They aren't ghosts, but something far, far worse! The silver in that casket must have cracked, Mr. Gerald. Some flaw has come in it. You'll see!'

"He didn't want to believe me, of course. But I finally persuaded him to go and look at one of the poor little victims laid out for burial in the local morgue. And there could be no doubting the truth then. No doubt at all! Blind or mad the doctors must have been to prate of 'anemia' and to overlook those marks that were so plain on the dead babe's white throat; the swollen livid marks where needle-sharp teeth had pressed home to drain away the life-blood and leave the little form so wasted and thin that it might almost have been some grotesque rag-doll that lay there before us on the slab.

" 'Nosferatu!' the master muttered as he turned away. 'Nosferatu, the undying! Somehow I never really believed it until now. I've carried out Grandfather's wishes because it was his will that I do so. But my sanity always clung to the hope that it was all only the madness of a childish old man, out of his head with the wild tales and superstitions he'd picked up in his Balkan wanderings. I read in his will of the Thing he said had bitten him in the night, had sucked his blood and made him into—well, into what he said he was! But I never really believed.'

"I shook my head sadly. 'Ye'd believe,' I told him, 'if ye could be down here in the vault with me at night, sir—if ye could hear what I've heard and see what I've seen. But until now I believed that no harm could come to anyone, that the casket was proof — but now, don't ye see, sir? We daren't trust it longer. We must act, at once! The Thing gains strength and cunning with each little life it takes. We must lay it once and for all. I know how 'tis done; I've read the olden rituals for laying them a thousand times over. And I've had all the needful things ready for just such an emergency.'

"But poor Mr. Gerald held back. 'No stake through the heart,' he quoted to me, 'no mutilation or ceremonial wounding shall desecrate my body after it be interred. Our pledge to poor Grandfather has been carried out all these years. Your family as well as mine has served in it. Must all our efforts go for nothing now, just because of one little rift in the coffin? Surely we can find that crack, seal it up——'

" 'But in time there'd be another, sir,' I reminded him. 'And another! Even the silver is not strong enough to hold against the eternal struggling of that which never dies, which never ceases in its blind efforts to escape and find its unholy nourishment!'

"And then suddenly Mr. Gerald's face lit up. 'Strength!' he gasped.

'That's it! More strength! The silver's potency is unimpaired. All it needs is support, the reinforcement of something harder! Man alive, there are other metals harder than silver nowadays! We've the resources of modern science to pit against this horror out of the past. I tell you, we may yet be able to seal it up for all eternity. Wait and see!'

"The very next day the workmen came, sir, from Bessemer—came with their weird apparatus and their scaffoldings and blow-torches. For days this old vault was lit with hissing blue flame like a spot in Hell, sir, and resounded with such hammering and pounding as quite to drown out—well, whatever other sounds there might have been. And when the men had done their job and gone away again—look, sir! That's what they left behind!"

HE HELD the lantern high. What was that vast black shape its rays lit lambently at the vault's far end?—that monstrous gleaming shape on stone trestles? A coffin? But surely it was larger than any coffin ever shaped by the hand of man.

"They tell me it's a new alloy they use for battleships, sir!" the old man said proudly. "An outer casing of stainless steel welded solidly to the silver coffin itself. Soldered, the outer and the inner layers, so that the magic power of the white metal, whatever queer potency it has to hold evil at bay, will be eternally supported by the strongest steel on earth! I doubt that a bolt of lightning could so much as dent that shining surface, sir. Seamless and air-tight, it'll endure a thousand years, even with what still struggles inside it.

"Yes, sir! I heard it too, sir. Of course I heard it. 'Tis no novelty to me, ye know. All these long dragging years I've been hearing it, down here in the night's hush. But I was wondering when *you'd* first notice it, sir. 'Tis plain enough when your attention is called to it, for all 'tis so muffled it might be coming from miles off. But it's right here in the crypt with us, that sound, only filtered through the silver and the steel.

"There's really nothing at all human about it, is there, sir? It might be the howling of a wolf, or almost anything savage and bestial. And yet sometimes there's such a note of human misery and despair in it as to fair bring tears to your eyes, sir. Only tonight there's more of menace in it somehow, sir, more than I've ever heard in all these years. You know, sir, I'm wondering if—good God, sir! Look! Look there!

"The coffin! It moved! I know ye think me mad—that thing weighs a score of tons. Your strength and mine united could not as much as tip it. And yet I saw it move a bit. There! Again! Ye see, sir? 'Tis not just the wavering of the lanternlight. Can't ye feel the vibrations of it in the very walls about us, in the very stones about us as it shakes? Oh God, sir! It's all my fault. I should never have fetched ye down here. I never thought—it's your blood, of course, that maddens him—the smell of your blood! He's used to mine, from all these years of familiarity. But you, young and strong—he'd burst himself to bits to get at you, sir. All these long years he's had no slaking for his hideous thirst. He's dying, sir, of a starvation so slow and so hideous it don't bear even thinking about. And now, fresh blood . . . your blood. . . .

"No, sir, we daren't flee from him. There's no running from things quicker than light, swifter than an adder's

pounce. We must fight him, sir! Here, take this. I know 'tis but an aspen stake, well sharpened, but a better weapon ye'll find it than any gun against what no gun could ever hit, sir! And here! Wind this string of garlic about your throat. Now stand, sir, and we'll defy him together! We'll fight all Hell, if need be. . . . Oh heavens, sir! how that coffin does shake! How it rocks and lurches on its stone trestles! All those tons of weight quivering like a jelly—I tell you, sir, I never saw the like of it before. The blind fury and malignity—can he break out? Oh, God, sir! I don't know! I don't know! I never saw him like this before. We can only pray. . . .

"Crash! And that awful sound of rocks splintering to powder, those clouds of dust arising to choke us—that was the coffn falling, sir. I saw it teetering just at the very edge of the trestles. Then it toppled—but now you can't see anything, sir, not even your hand before your eyes! And this dust gets in a man's nostrils, cuts off his breath. And all the while that howling and screeching rises to a very devil's pæan of triumph in our ears. Stand firm, sir! Pray to whatever God ye believe in, and be ready. We've our stakes here, and we'll strike with them at the heart of anything we see in the dust-cloud—the evil heart that only an aspen stake can pierce; that an aspen stake should have pierced long ago. . . . We'll defy him together. D'ye hear. Hell-thing that was once old Andrew Holt? *We defy ye!* . . .

"TAKE it easy, sir. Don't try to get up yet. Just rest there for a moment. I guess ye must have fainted, sir. I caught ye as ye fell!

"Ye must forgive an old man's nerves, sir! It's these long years of solitude and long night vigils. I'm not the man I was once, and the shock of the thing—but of course there never was any actual *danger!* How could there be? Did I not say that nothing could possibly damage that coffin, sir? See, there it lies, still there on the floor's cracked old slabs, safe and sound, for all its battering; though the Lord knows how we'll ever get it back on those trestles, sir. It may be that it will have to stay always half propped like that, for I doubt that twenty men could lift it. Sure, the struggle with it exhausted even him, sir. There's been no sound from him, no movement since that last frenzied effort. I wonder, sir. . . . Of course there must be natural laws governing these things, just as governs ourselves, sir. And too much effort may be—well, fatal to them, as to us!

"Perhaps ye've seen the last dying struggle of That which should never have lived at all, sir. Perhaps ye've seen peace come at last to the soul of old Andrew Holt!

"And if not now, surely it must come at last, sir, mayhap not in my time, or even in my son's time. But in the end—steady, sir. We'll go this way."

He helped me stagger toward the old stairs, through the leprous dark.

These Doth the Lord Hate

By GANS T. FIELD

A weird fragment from the Dark Ages

BEFORE me lies open E. A. Ashwin's translation of *Compendium Maleficarum,* just as three hundred years ago the original lay open before judges and preachers, a notable source of warning against, and indictment of, witchcraft. And from its pages have risen three folk long dead.

The magic that gives them life is that of imagination, concerning which power Brother Francesco-Maria Guazzo writes with sober learning in the very first chapter of the *Compendium.* Their simple embalming was a lone paragraph, barely a hundred and fifty words in length—one of Guazzo's "various and ample examples, with the sole purpose that men, considering the cunning of witches, might study to live piously and devoutly in the Lord."

Guazzo has written shortly and with reserve, though never dryly; and in 1608, when the *Compendium* was first printed under patronage of Cardinal Orazio Maffei, his style was adequate. James I of England still shuddered over the memory of Dr. Fian's conspiracy with Satan to destroy him. In Bredbur, near Cologne, lived a dozen or more aging men who horrifiedly had seen a captured wolf turn back into their neighbor, the damnable Peter Stumpf. Gilles Grenier, prisoned in a Franciscan friary at Bordeaux, would cheerfully tell any visitor his adventures as a devil-gifted warlock, shapeshifter and cannibal. But times and beliefs have changed. Since Guazzo himself foresaw that his book might provoke "the idle jests of the censorious," let his shade not vex me if I embroider his brief, plain citation.

The phenomenon occurred near Treves, upon the goodly river Moselle, immediately east of the present Franco-German border. Some know Treves, ancient and pleasant, with the cathedral where is preserved a coat of Jesus Christ to call forth the world's wonder and worship. Around the town, now as in Guazzo's time, are pleasant fields and gardens. The scene we are to consider, though unfolding upon land properly German, is more than a trifle French.

In the district of Treves, writes Guazzo and translates Ashwin, *a peasant was planting cabbages with his eight-year-old daughter. . . .*

Frenchmen hold cabbages in notable esteem and affection—a favorite love-name, throughout the provinces and environs of France, is "cabbage." Without good store of this vegetable, no Moselle farm would be perfect, and certainly no Moselle stew. The peasant was planting, and so it was spring, a fair day with the sky clear and bright, as we shall observe. Our man of the soil comes readily to life before us, stooping and delving at the fresh, good-smelling furrow. He seems a sturdy

fellow, sharp-featured like a Gaul, blond-bearded like a Teuton. His widely spread feet are encased in wooden shoes, he wears a loose, drab frock and a shapeless cap. For all the distance of years, he is amazingly like a peasant cabbage-grower of today.

And beside him, as we have read, works his daughter. Eight years old—is that not young to be a gardener? Yet she is vigorous and intelligent and willing beyond her years. The trowel and seedbag seem to do their own duty in her small, quick hands. Her father is deeply impressed. He, continues the commentator: . . . *praised the girl highly for the work. The young maid, whose sex and age combined to make her talkative, boasted that she could do more wonderful things than that; and when her father asked what they were.*

It is well worth another full stop to consider that complete picture—one of rustic endeavor, not too heavy or too distasteful, especially when the gardeners are so bound together in mutual understanding and affection. Seed-sowers of today can understand Father's pride in his industrious daughter. "How well you dig, my little cabbage!" And his eyes crinkle up in his good-natured brown face as he enjoys his own play upon words. He doubts honestly if there was ever such a good child. She is a true daughter of her mother, and here he turns to glance over his shoulder at the house above the garden—small but snug and well repaired, with an ample gush of smoke from the chimney hole.

His wife is evidently concocting the noonday meal. Something more than bread and soup, he warrants—he is mystified at the plenty of good things she provides, as if she got it by enchantment.

I WILL grant that the picture is too bright, too cheerful; were it fiction, we might borrow from Edgar Allan Poe the device of a black cloud dimming the sky. But perhaps the contrast will be the greater with things as they are.

The excellent child finds the more savor in Father's commendation because she knows that well she deserves it. Nor is she backward in telling him that planting cabbages is not her lone virtue and study. Other of her talents may please and benefit him.

Again Guazzo: . . . *she said, "Go away a little, and I will quickly make it rain on whatever part of the garden you wish."*

And Father? It takes no further effort of the mind's eye to see that peasant visage broaden and the beard stir in a great grin. This daughter of his never fails to warm his heart. Surely she must have heard him say that rain would be welcome in this planting season. As she grows older, she will hear from the priest that only God almighty can send rain. But her pretense is innocent—today let her have her fun, play a game to make them both laugh. Guazzo calls the good man astonished, but more probably he achieves an elaborate burlesque of surprises as he says: *"Come, then, I will go a little away."*

Jovially he tramps off, fifty paces or so, taking care not to tread on the freshly seeded cabbage-rows. He and his daughter have gone far ahead of their intentions this morning; there can be a minute or two of rest and sport. He pauses and turns.

Now, for the first time, perhaps he scowls.

The child has caught up a gnarled stick and is beating up a froth of mud in a shallow trench. She is speaking, too, or saying a litany. He can catch

only the rhythmic sound of her voice, no words.

. . . and behold there fell from the clouds a sudden rain upon the said place.

"From the clouds"—whence came those clouds so suddenly? And now this deluge; from his point apart, the cabbage-farmer stares. His shoulders hunch in his loose smock, as though they supported a sudden heavy weight. His sabots dig into the earth. One square-fingered hand steals upward to sign the cross upon his thick chest.

And over yonder falls a rain such as no Christian cares to see, heavy and narrow. It is a shimmery, drenching column of down-darting water, no thicker than a round tower of the baron's castle at Treves, but tall as infinity. He can hear it, too, a drumming rattle on the thirsty clods, like the patterned dance-gambols of many light impious hoofs.

I

He crossed himself again, and the rain is over, as abruptly and completely as it began. Now is the time for him to inquire in his heart if indeed he saw and heard rightly.

He knows that he did. The rain is gone, but there remains a circular patch of earth all churned to mud; and here comes trotting his daughter, smiling and triumphant, and her garments are drenched. Her eyes sparkle; so sparkled the eyes of her mother, no later than last Sunday, when a roast of pig came to the rough table, as if from nowhere. The hungry husband did not ask about it then; now the question burns him—whence came that meat?

All this detail is romance, a careless padding of Guazzo's narrative, which is much shorter and balder:

The astounded father asked: "Who taught you to do this?" She answered: "My mother did; and she is very clever at this and other things like it."

We may assure ourselves that there will be no more cabbage-planting this day. The peasant nods dumbly, and plucks at the hem of his smock. Then he clears his throat and says that the sun is high, and that the midday meal is undoubtedly ready.

Together they go to the hut above the garden—the man's sabots thudding heavily and lifelessly, the child's bare feet skipping and dancing. A hearty, rosy-cheeked woman greets them loudly at the door. To be sure, dinner is ready; but he who suggested a stoppage of work to eat, he finds himself unable to swallow a crumb.

Finally he rises, lurches rather than walks from the door. Near by is a secluded spot; we can readily visualize it as a clump of bushy young trees beside a narrow creek. Into that hiding plunges the peasant. Screened by the trunks and branches, he sinks wretchedly to his knees. He feels that this is not enough of humility. His face droops, his shoulders go slack, and a moment later he lies prostrate upon the shadowed mold of last year's leaves.

There he prays, for an hour and an hour. Sometimes he finds words to say, oftener he achieves only moans and unaccustomed tears.

Can he not be forgiven for having merciful doubts as to his duty in this case? Even the Savior once pleaded that a bitter cup be withheld from His lips. But the peasant makes shift to rise at last. His face is set as firmly as the carven granite of a saint on the cathedral's doorway, yonder in Treves. True, his hands tremble a little, as Abraham's hands must have trembled as they lifted to sacrifice Isaac at God's command; but the final answer has

come into his heart, and he knows what to do.

Here is that answer, as Guazzo gives it:

The peasant nobly faced his right and plain duty; so a few days later, on the pretense that he had been invited to a wedding, he took his wife and daughter dressed in festal wedding robes to the neighboring town, where he handed them over to the Judge to be punished for the crime of witchcraft.

It is hard to imagine how the man lived during those intervening "few days." It is impossible to divine what were his arts and powers that he kept a smiling face and calm manner while his heart smoldered like a coal from the smithy.

And the plan of betrayal, that was a shrewd one and worthy of the greatest witchfinder, let alone a peasant. Yet I doubt if he congratulated himself upon it.

They go to the fair town of Treves, all three in holiday gear. Sometimes, on that journey, the little rain-maker must have been weary, and rode perforce on Father's shoulder. Was his arm tighter than usual around her little body?

Did his voice quiver as he answered some question she prattled? I make no doubt of that; but from Guazzo we know what the end of the jaunt turned out to be.

Of a sudden the mother and daughter are in the hands of the judge, under guard of his men-at-arms.

With what fierce scorn does the witch-woman deny the charges—until, after hours of questioning and perhaps a touch of the lash or thumbscrew, she makes confession. True, she is a sorceress. She has signed the Devil's book, attended the Sabbat, sworn the oath of evil. She has schooled her daughter to the like infamy.

Look elsewhere in Guazzo's absorbing *Compendium* for what must have been the rest of the story. Death by fire, he says confidently, is the only right punishment for the dreadful sin of witchcraft. A stake, therefore, is set upright in the market-place of Treves, and heaped about with faggots. To this the witch and her fledgling are borne, high upon the armored shoulders of the law's servants. With the last of her tears, the older culprit pleads and prays that she be allowed to walk. Sternly the judge refuses this request; is it not a commonplace that a witch, going to execution, need but touch toe to earth for her bonds to dissolve and her executioners to fall as if struck by lightning?

That double witch-burning is a rare treat and curiosity in Treves, and it receives the attention it merits. Not a soul in all the district, from the baron of the castle to the beggars whose home and heritage is the gutter, but must draw near to see.

No, that is not strictly true. Not every soul in the district is present at the burning; for a solitary man trudges away, to his empty home by the cabbage garden. His big hands are locked behind him, his chin weighs like lead upon his breast, the lines of his face teem with tears. He dares to utter the supplication refused by the priest at the cathedral—a timid prayer that two spirits even now taking flight, shall not be utterly consumed in hell; O Lord, let them win at last through long punishment and sincere repentance to some measure of comfort in a most humble corner of heaven.

Not all agonies are of the fire.

Date in the City Room

By TALBOT JOHNS

Two old friends keep a weird rendezvous

HE STOOD on the door-sill of the old Globe city room and looked around. The place seemed about the same, though after a year's absence he seemed to see it differently—sort of all at once instead of item by item. There was a new and shiny teletype clicking monotonously in the corner, but the faded yellow bulbs with their green metal shades hanging from the ceiling still cut triangles through a perpetual haze of blue smoke. Cigarette-charred desks, crumpled wads of yellow copy-paper and the old crack in the ceiling that the owners had never fixed because the plaster had fallen on Bart Davis' head and he'd been killed the next day on a fire story—the old-looking boy in the doorway took them all in with a glance and turned to Clem, sitting at the night desk.

"Hello, Reggie," said Clem.

"It's been a long time," said Reggie.

"It has, at that," said Clem.

That was all, for a minute. It was enough, Reggie thought. Things would begin to iron themselves out in a while. No use trying to rush them.

The smoke from his cigarette curled under a lampshade and shot out in a little swirl as it hit the hot bulb. Red Mackenzie, of the twelve-to-eight shift, slouched into the city room, cursing softly because he was a couple of minutes late.

He almost collided with Reggie, but didn't give him a glance. I suppose that's what happens, thought Reggie, when you've been away as long as I have. He didn't have to look right through me, though.

"It's just a year to the day, isn't it?" said Clem, drumming noiselessly on the night desk with his big knuckles.

"That's right," said Reggie, "just a year."

"I was wondering if you'd come," said Clem.

"You knew very well I would," said Reggie. "I told you, didn't I?"

Funny thing, but it was getting colder. Red was on the phone now, getting a stick from AP on some wedding in Baltimore, and had his coat off, despite the chill. Reggie wanted to speak to Red, but decided not to. Red was a good enough guy, but probably wouldn't understand. Clem—good old fat Clem, with his thinning gray hair and his forty-year jowls—was leaning back in his chair, staring at Bart Davis' hole in the ceiling, his thumbs linked in the arm-holes of his vest as Reggie had seen them for years when he worked on the night staff. "One of Clem's boys," they used to call Reggie in the old days. One of the boys who would go through a herd of wildcats and a hundred cops to get any story that Clem wanted—until a year ago.

"We were fools, Reggie," said Clem.

"I'll say," replied Reggie.

"We should never have let her jam our lives up that way," said Clem.

"Women are poison to good newspapermen," said Reggie.

Now it was coming out, and he was

glad of it. He'd worried about this for a year, and here it was, staring him right in the face. Three hundred and sixty-five nights of thinking about Clem, to whom he should have been loyal—of the girl, who knew no loyalty to anything, and of himself, too. All added up, they made this moment, right now, face to face with Clem and the whole thing ready to blow off.

All Clem said was, "We should have found some other way out of it."

"You know I felt that way, too, at the last minute," said Reggie, "when it was too late."

"Yes," said Clem, "I know."

Reggie had known that Clem would be like this, because Clem always understood. His heart warmed up in spite of his chill. He was glad he'd come—glad he'd kept this crazy date, made a year ago when neither of them thought it could be kept. No matter how hard it was, these things ought to be talked out, he thought. No matter what happened or what they'd done a year ago, he and Clem were still as close as any two men could be. Sometimes, during the past year, he'd wondered if they *would* be men when they met tonight. People can stand just so much and no more. Clem seemed the same, though. Probably he did, too.

TIME seemed to race through his brain as he stood there, six feet of curly-topped reporter, gray slouch hat on the back of his head. Time was a funny thing. For a year it had dragged until he almost went insane, waiting to come and see Clem as they'd planned it. Now, here he was and there was no time, really—just he and Clem, and Red on the phone, still getting the paragraph from Baltimore and paying no attention to either of them. No minutes or seconds in this moment—just he, Reggie, waiting for Clem, his friend, to say something.

"It wasn't really your fault, Reggie," said Clem. "She was a wild one and I was sort of a fool. None like an old one, they tell me." He laughed, and startled Reggie, because it wasn't like one of Clem's old rollicking bellows that used to clear the wires as far as Chicago. It was just a little, thin, sardonic laugh, like the wind whispering in a tenement fire-escape.

"Don't blame her too much," said Reggie. "A couple of years before she met you she and I were pretty thick. Came a time when I couldn't forget it, and neither could she."

His words seemed to come to his ears from very far away, and sounded short and clipped. How else should they sound? he wondered. He was tired. The constant clacking of the teletype got on his nerves, and he seemed unable to hold his thoughts together as well as he used to. He wandered over to the teletype to see what all the racket was about, and pulled a yard of paper out of the basket. "Famous Movie Actress Gets Fourth Divorce; Senator Promises Lower Taxes If; Orange, N. J., Bride and Groom Killed in Triple Crash. . . ." A dream world, he thought—he and Clem had the only reality—he and Clem and their problem.

". . . And I was too old, anyway. Must have been crazy." Reggie realized that Clem was still talking. Funny—they must have gotten out of tune for a minute. "You two kids—I loved you both. Should have just backed out of the whole thing. But I had to go and marry her, and try to set up housekeeping. Me, Clem Roberts, whose home is right behind this desk and always has been! Thank the Lord there were no kids. What's she doing now, Reggie?"

"I don't know," said Reggie. What did he care what she was doing?

"Don't care, either, hey kid?" Clem was more like himself now, but a little pale still. "Neither do I. It's you and me from now on!"

There it was. That was what Reggie had been waiting for. Now that he had it, now that he knew that he and Clem were as they always had been, what of it? What was left for them now? He felt tired again. Let Clem figure it out.

"You figure it out, Clem," he said. "Where do we go from here?"

"Now you're talking sense, boy," said Clem. "I don't see any reason why we can't go on as usual, and pick up right where we left off. Things are going to be different—don't kid yourself on that—because we're different. We have to be, after"—he made a funny, quick motion with his hand—"all that. But we're still pals, we've got more sense than we used to have, and that's that."

They used to call him, the boys that didn't like him—and there were plenty who didn't, though they slaved for him —"That's That" Roberts.

Clem pulled his big antique watch out of his vest pocket, looked at it and started to pull on his coat. Then he reached for the phone.

"Shoot me up a morning final!" he barked in a voice that didn't sound like his at all. Red Mackenzie, batting out the Baltimore story on his typewriter, looked around suddenly as if he'd heard Clem for the first time, and then turned back to his pecking with a puzzled look on his face.

A boy brought the paper in, tossed it on the desk, and ran out again without saying a word. Reggie leaned over with his fists on the desk top, and watched Clem turn to page three.

"You didn't make front page, Reggie," said Clem. "Bad luck to the end."

"O. K. with me," said Reggie. He leaned over further to see the half-column story, and his coat sleeve slipped up on his arm.

"Bad burn you have there," said Clem.

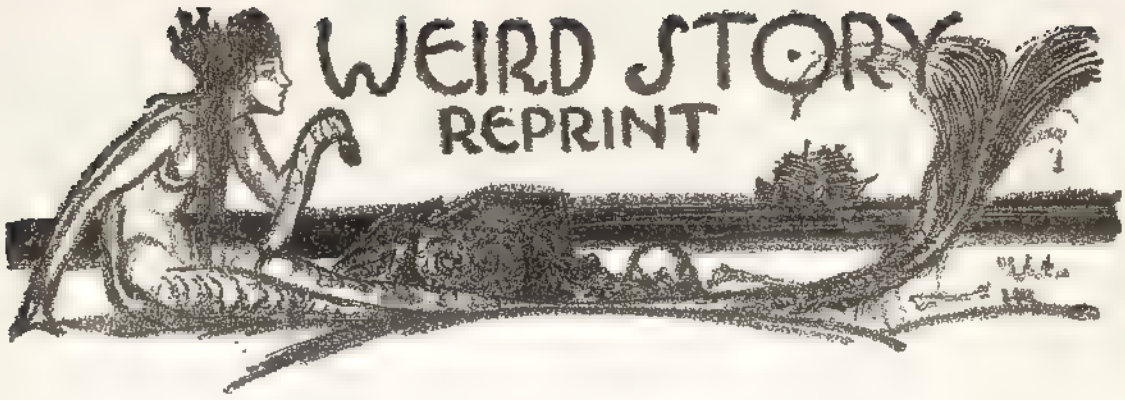
"Doesn't hurt now," said Reggie, and they read the story together.

PAYS WITH LIFE FOR CRIME ON MURDER ANNIVERSARY

Ossining, N. Y., July 26: At two minutes past midnight tonight Reginald J. Fallon, New York Globe reporter, went calmly to the electric chair for the murder by shooting a year ago today of his city editor, Clement J. Roberts of White Plains, N. Y. Witnesses marveled at the composure of the condemned man, who seemed to welcome . . .

"That's that," said Clem. "Let's go."

They walked out of the city room arm in arm, and the clock said quarter after twelve.



A Rendezvous in Averoigne

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

GERARD DE L'AUTOMNE was meditating the rimes of a new ballade in honor of Fleurette, as he followed the leaf-arrassed pathway toward Vyones through the woodland of Averoigne. Since he was on his way to meet Fleurette, who had promised to keep a rendezvous among the oaks and beeches like any peasant girl, Gerard himself made better progress than the ballade. His love was at that stage which, even for a professional troubadour, is more productive of distraction than inspiration; and he was recurrently absorbed in a meditation upon other than merely verbal felicities.

The grass and trees had assumed the fresh enamel of a mediæval May; the turf was figured with little blossoms of azure and white and yellow, like an ornate broidery; and there was a pebbly stream that murmured beside the way, as if the voices of undines were parleying deliciously beneath its waters. The sun-lulled air was laden with a wafture of youth and romance; and the longing that welled from the heart of Gerard seemed to mingle mystically with the balsams of the wood.

Gerard was a *trouvère* whose scant years and many wanderings had brought him a certain renown. After the fashion of his kind he had roamed from court to court, from château to château; and he was now the guest of the Comte de la Frênaie, whose high castle held dominion over half the surrounding forest. Visiting one day that quaint cathedral town, Vyones, which lies so near to the ancient wood of Averoigne, Gerard had seen Fleurette, the daughter of a well-to-do mercer named Guillaume Cochin; and had become more sincerely enamored of her blond piquancy than was to be expected from one who had been so frequently susceptible in such matters. He had managed to make his feelings known to her; and, after a

* From WEIRD TALES for May, 1931.

month of billets-doux, ballads and stolen interviews contrived by the help of a complaisant waiting-woman, she had made this woodland tryst with him in the absence of her father from Vyones. Accompanied by her maid and a man-servant, she was to leave the town early that afternoon and meet Gerard under a certain beech-tree of enormous age and size. The servants would then withdraw discreetly; and the lovers, to all intents and purposes, would be alone. It was not likely that they would be seen or interrupted; for the gnarled and immemorial wood possessed an ill-repute among the peasantry. Somewhere in this wood there was the ruinous and haunted Château des Faussesflammes; and, also, there was a double tomb, within which the Sieur Hugh du Malinbois and his chatelaine, who were notorious for sorcery in their time, had lain unconsecrated for more than two hundred years. Of these, and their phantoms, there were grisly tales; and there were stories of loup-garous and goblins, of fays and devils and vampires that infested Averoigne. But to these tales Gerard had given little heed, considering it improbable that such creatures would fare abroad in open daylight. The madcap Fleurette had professed herself unafraid also; but it had been necessary to promise the servants a substantial *pourboire,* since they shared fully the local superstitions.

Gerard had wholly forgotten the legendry of Averoigne, as he hastened along the sun-flecked path. He was nearing the appointed beech-tree, which a turn of the path would soon reveal; and his pulses quickened and became tremulous, as he wondered if Fleurette had already reached the trysting-place. He abandoned all effort to continue his ballade, which, in the three miles he had walked from La Frênaie, had not progressed beyond the middle of a tentative first stanza.

His thoughts were such as would befit an ardent and impatient lover. They were now interrupted by a shrill scream that rose to an unendurable pitch of fear and horror, issuing from the green stillness of the pines beside the way. Startled, he peered at the thick branches; and as the scream fell back to silence, he heard the sound of dull and hurrying footfalls, and a scuffling as of several bodies. Again the scream arose. It was plainly the voice of a woman in some distressful peril. Loosening his dagger in its sheath, and clutching more firmly a long hornbeam staff which he had brought with him as a protection against the vipers which were said to lurk in Averoigne, he plunged without hesitation or premeditation among the low-hanging boughs from which the voice had seemed to emerge.

In a small open space beyond the trees, he saw a woman who was struggling with three ruffians of exceptionally brutal and evil aspect. Even in the haste and vehemence of the moment, Gerard realized that he had never before seen such men or such a woman. The woman was clad in a gown of emerald green that matched her eyes; in her face was the pallor of dead things, together with a faery beauty; and her lips were dyed as with the scarlet of newly flowing blood. The men were dark as Moors, and their eyes were red slits of flame beneath oblique brows with animal-like bristles. There was something very peculiar in the shape of their feet; but Gerard did not realize the exact nature of the peculiarity till long afterward. Then he remembered that all of them were seemingly club-footed, though they were able to move with surpassing agility.

Somehow, he could never recall what sort of clothing they had worn.

The woman turned a beseeching gaze upon Gerard as he sprang forth from amid the boughs. The men, however, did not seem to heed his coming; though one of them caught in a hairy clutch the hands which the woman sought to reach toward her rescuer.

Lifting his staff, Gerard rushed upon the ruffians. He struck a tremendous blow at the head of the nearest one—a blow that should have leveled the fellow to earth. But the staff came down on unresisting air, and Gerard staggered and almost fell headlong in trying to recover his equilibrium. Dazed and uncomprehending, he saw that the knot of struggling figures had vanished utterly. At least, the three men had vanished; but from the middle branches of a tall pine beyond the open space, the death-white features of the woman smiled upon him for a moment with faint, inscrutable guile ere they melted among the needles.

GERARD understood now; and he shivered as he crossed himself. He had been deluded by phantoms or demons, doubtless for no good purpose; he had been the gull of a questionable enchantment. Plainly there was something after all in the legends he had heard, in the ill-renown of the forest of Averoigne.

He retraced his way toward the path he had been following. But when he thought to reach again the spot from which he had heard that shrill unearthly scream, he saw that there was no longer a path; nor, indeed, any feature of the forest which he could remember or recognize. The foliage about him no longer displayed a brilliant verdure; it was sad and funereal, and the trees themselves were either cypress-like, or were already sere with autumn or decay. In lieu of the purling brook there lay before him a tarn of waters that were dark and dull as clotting blood, and which gave back no reflection of the brown autumnal sedges that trailed therein like the hair of suicides, and the skeletons of rotting osiers that writhed above them.

Now, beyond all question, Gerard knew that he was the victim of an evil enchantment. In answering that beguileful cry for succor, he had exposed himself to the spell, had been lured within the circle of its power. He could not know what forces of wizardry or demonry had willed to draw him thus; but he knew that his situation was fraught with supernatural menace. He gripped the hornbeam staff more tightly in his hand, and prayed to all the saints he could remember, as he peered about for some tangible bodily presence of ill.

The scene was utterly desolate and lifeless, like a place where cadavers might keep their tryst with demons. Nothing stirred, not even a dead leaf; and there was no whisper of dry grass or foliage, no song of birds nor murmuring of bees, no sigh nor chuckle of water. The corpse-gray heavens above seemed never to have held a sun; and the chill, unchanging light was without source or destination, without beams or shadows.

Gerard surveyed his environment with a cautious eye; and the more he looked the less he liked it: for some new and disagreeable detail was manifest at every glance. There were moving lights in the wood that vanished if he eyed them intently; there were drowned faces in the tarn that came and went like livid bubbles before he could discern their features. And, peering across the lake, he wondered why he had not seen the many-turreted castle

of hoary stone whose nearer walls were based in the dead waters. It was so gray and still and vasty, that it seemed to have stood for incomputable ages between the stagnant tarn and the equally stagnant heavens. It was ancienter than the world, it was older than the light: it was co-eval with fear and darkness; and a horror dwelt upon it and crept unseen but palpable along its bastions.

There was no sign of life about the castle; and no banners flew above its turrets or its donjon. But Gerard knew, as surely as if a voice had spoken aloud to warn him, that here was the fountain-head of the sorcery by which he had been beguiled. A growing panic whispered in his brain, he seemed to hear the rustle of malignant plumes, the mutter of demoniac threats and plottings. He turned, and fled among the funereal trees.

Amid his dismay and wilderment, even as he fled, he thought of Fleurette and wondered if she were awaiting him at their place of rendezvous, or if she and her companions had also been enticed and led astray in a realm of damnable unrealities. He renewed his prayers, and implored the saints for her safety as well as his own.

The forest through which he ran was a maze of bafflement and eeriness. There were no landmarks, there were no tracks of animals or men; and the swart cypresses and sere autumnal trees grew thicker and thicker as if some malevolent will were marshaling them against his progress. The boughs were like implacable arms that strove to retard him; he could have sworn that he felt them twine about him with the strength and suppleness of living things. He fought them, insanely, desperately, and seemed to hear a crackling of infernal laughter in their twigs as he fought. At last, with a sob of relief, he broke through into a sort of trail. Along this trail, in the mad hope of eventual escape, he ran like one whom a fiend pursues; and after a short interval he came again to the shores of the tarn, above whose motionless waters the high and hoary turrets of that time-forgotten castle were still dominant. Again he turned and fled; and once more, after similar wanderings and like struggles, he came back to the inevitable tarn.

With a leaden sinking of his heart, as into some ultimate slough of despair and terror, he resigned himself and made no further effort to escape. His very will was benumbed, was crushed down as by the incumbence of a superior volition that would no longer permit his puny recalcitrance. He was unable to resist when a strong and hateful compulsion drew his footsteps along the margent of the tarn toward the looming castle.

When he came nearer, he saw that the edifice was surrounded by a moat whose waters were stagnant as those of the lake, and were mantled with the iridescent scum of corruption. The drawbridge was down and the gates were open, as if to receive an expected guest. But still there was no sign of human occupancy; and the walls of the great gray building were silent as those of a sepulcher. And more tomb-like even than the rest was the square and overtowering bulk of the mighty donjon.

IMPELLED by the same power that had drawn him along the lake-shore, Gerard crossed the drawbridge and passed beneath the frowning barbican into a vacant courtyard. Barred windows looked blankly down; and at the opposite end of the court a door stood

mysteriously open, revealing a dark hall. As he approached the doorway, he saw that a man was standing on the threshold; though a moment previous he could have sworn that it was untenanted by any visible form.

Gerard had retained his hornbeam staff; and though his reason told him that such a weapon was futile against any supernatural foe, some obscure instinct prompted him to clasp it valiantly as he neared the waiting figure on the sill.

The man was inordinately tall and cadaverous, and was dressed in black garments of a superannuate mode. His lips were strangely red, amid his bluish beard and the mortuary whiteness of his face. They were like the lips of the woman who, with her assailants, had disappeared in a manner so dubious when Gerard had approached them. His eyes were pale and luminous as marsh-lights; and Gerard shuddered at his gaze and at the cold, ironic smile of his scarlet lips, that seemed to reserve a world of secrets all too dreadful and hideous to be disclosed.

"I am the Sieur du Malinbois," the man announced. His tones were both unctuous and hollow, and served to increase the repugnance felt by the young troubadour. And when his lips parted, Gerard had a glimpse of teeth that were unnaturally small and were pointed like the fangs of some fierce animal.

"Fortune has willed that you should become my guest," the man went on. "The hospitality which I can proffer you is rough and inadequate, and it may be that you will find my abode a trifle dismal. But at least I can assure you of a welcome no less ready than sincere."

"I thank you for your kind offer," said Gerard. "But I have an appointment with a friend; and I seem in some unaccountable manner to have lost my way. I should be profoundly grateful if you would direct me toward Vyones. There should be a path not far from here; and I have been so stupid as to stray from it."

The words rang empty and hopeless in his own ears even as he uttered them; and the name that his strange host had given—the Sieur du Malinbois—was haunting his mind like the funereal accents of a knell; though he could not recall at that moment the macabre and spectral ideas which the name tended to evoke.

"Unfortunately, there are no paths from my château to Vyones," the stranger replied. "As for your rendezvous, it will be kept in another manner, at another place, than the one appointed. I must therefore insist that you accept my hospitality. Enter, I pray; but leave your hornbeam staff at the door. You will have no need of it any longer."

Gerard thought that he made a move of distaste and aversion with his over-red lips as he spoke the last sentences, and that his eyes lingered on the staff with an obscure apprehensiveness. And the strange emphasis of his words and demeanor served to awaken other fantasmal and macabre thoughts in Gerard's brain; though he could not formulate them fully till afterward. And somehow he was prompted to retain the weapon, no matter how useless it might be against an enemy of spectral or diabolic nature. So he said:

"I must crave your indulgence if I retain the staff. I have made a vow to carry it with me, in my right hand or never beyond arm's reach, till I have slain two vipers."

"That is a queer vow," rejoined his host. "However, bring it with you if

you like. It is of no matter to me if you choose to encumber yourself with a wooden stick."

He turned abruptly, motioning Gerard to follow him. The troubadour obeyed unwillingly, with one reward glance at the vacant heavens and the empty courtyard. He saw with no great surprise that a sudden and furtive darkness had closed in upon the château without moon or star, as if it had been merely waiting for him to enter before it descended. It was thick as the folds of a cerecloth, it was airless and stifling like the gloom of a sepulcher that has been sealed for ages; and Gerard was aware of a veritable oppression, a corporeal and psychic difficulty in breathing, as he crossed the threshold.

He saw that cressets were now burning in the dim hall to which his host had admitted him; though he had not perceived the time and agency of their lighting. The illumination they afforded was singularly vague and indistinct, and the thronging shadows of the hall were unexplainably numerous, and moved with a mysterious disquiet; though the flames themselves were still as tapers that burn for the dead in a windless vault.

AT THE end of the passage, the Sieur du Malinbois flung open a heavy door of dark and somber wood. Beyond, in what was plainly the eating-room of the château, several people were seated about a long table by the light of cressets no less dreary and dismal than those in the hall. In the strange, uncertain glow, their faces were touched with a gloomy dubiety, with a lurid distortion; and it seemed to Gerard that shadows hardly distinguishable from the figures were gathered around the board. But nevertheless he recognized the assembled company at a glance, with an overpowering shock of astonishment.

At one end of the board, there sat the woman in emerald green who had vanished in so doubtful a fashion amid the pines when Gerard answered her call for succor. At one side, looking very pale and forlorn and frightened, was Fleurette Cochin. At the lower end reserved for retainers and inferiors, there sat the maid and the man-servant who had accompanied Fleurette to her rendezvous with Gerard.

The Sieur du Malinbois turned to the troubadour with a smile of sardonic amusement.

"I believe you have already met every one assembled," he observed. "But you have not yet been formally presented to my wife, Agathe, who is presiding over the board. Agathe, I bring to you Gerard de l'Automne, a young troubadour of much note and merit."

The woman nodded slightly, without speaking, and pointed to a chair opposite Fleurette. Gerard seated himself, and the Sieur du Malinbois assumed according to feudal custom a place at the head of the table beside his wife.

Now, for the first time, Gerard noticed that there were servitors who came and went in the room, setting upon the table various wines and viands. The servitors were preternaturally swift and noiseless, and somehow it was very difficult to be sure of their precise features or their costumes. They seemed to walk in an adumbration of sinister insoluble twilight. But the troubadour was disturbed by a feeling that they resembled the swart demoniac ruffians who had disappeared together with the woman in green when he approached them.

The meal that ensued was a weird and funereal affair. A sense of in-

superable constraint, of smothering horror and hideous oppression, was upon Gerard; and though he wanted to ask Fleurette a hundred questions, and also demand an explanation of sundry matters from his host and hostess, he was totally unable to frame the words or to utter them. He could only look at Fleurette, and read in her eyes a duplication of his own helpless bewilderment and nightmare thralldom. Nothing was said by the Sieur du Malinbois and his lady, who were exchanging glances of a secret and baleful intelligence all through the meal; and Fleurette's maid and man-servant were obviously paralyzed by terror, like birds beneath the hypnotic gaze of deadly serpents.

The foods were rich and of strange savor; and the wines were fabulously old, and seemed to retain in their topaz or violet depths the unextinguished fire of buried centuries. But Gerard and Fleurette could barely touch them; and they saw that the Sieur du Malinbois and his lady did not eat or drink at all. The gloom of the chamber deepened; the servitors became more furtive and spectral in their movements; the stifling air was laden with unformulable menace, was constrained by the spell of a black and lethal necromancy. Above the aromas of the rare foods, the bouquets of the antique wines, there crept forth the choking mustiness of hidden vaults and embalmed centurial corruption, together with the ghostly spice of a strange perfume that seemed to emanate from the person of the chatelaine. And now Gerard was remembering many tales from the legendry of Averoigne, which he had heard and disregarded; was recalling the story of a Sieur du Malinbois and his lady, the last of the name and the most evil, who had been buried somewhere in this forest hundreds of years ago; and whose tomb was shunned by the peasantry since they were said to continue their sorceries even in death. He wondered what influence had bedrugged his memory, that he had not recalled it wholly when he had first heard the name. And he was remembering other things and other stories, all of which confirmed his instinctive belief regarding the nature of the people into whose hands he had fallen. Also, he recalled a folklore superstition concerning the use to which a wooden stake can be put; and realized why the Sieur du Malinbois had shown a peculiar interest in the hornbeam staff. Gerard had laid the staff beside his chair when he sat down; and he was reassured to find that it had not vanished. Very quietly and unobtrusively, he placed his foot upon it.

The uncanny meal came to an end; and the host and his chatelaine arose.

"I shall now conduct you to your rooms," said the Sieur du Malinbois, including all of his guests in a dark, inscrutable glance. "Each of you can have a separate chamber, if you so desire; or Fleurette Cochin and her maid Angelique can remain together; and the man-servant Raoul can sleep in the same room with Messire Gerard."

A preference for the latter procedure was voiced by Fleurette and the troubadour. The thought of uncompanioned solitude in that castle of timeless midnight and nameless mystery was abhorrent to an insupportable degree.

The four were now led to their respective chambers, on opposite sides of a hall whose length was but indeterminately revealed by the dismal lights. Fleurette and Gerard bade each other a dismayed and reluctant good-night beneath the constraining eye of their host. Their rendezvous was hardly the one

which they had thought to keep; and both were overwhelmed by the supernatural situation amid whose dubious horrors and ineluctable sorceries they had somehow become involved. And no sooner had Gerard left Fleurette than he began to curse himself for a poltroon because he had not refused to part from her side; and he marvelled at the spell of drug-like involition that had bedrowsed all his faculties. It seemed that his will was not for his own, but had been thrust down and throttled by an alien power.

The room assigned to Gerard and Raoul was furnished with a couch, and a great bed whose curtains were of antique fashion and fabric. It was lighted with tapers that had a funereal suggestion in their form, and which burned dully in an air that was stagnant with the mustiness of dead years.

"May you sleep soundly," said the Sieur du Malinbois. The smile that accompanied and followed the words was no less unpleasant than the oily and sepulchral tone in which they were uttered.

The troubadous and the servant were conscious of profound relief when he went out and closed the leaden-clanging door. And their relief was hardly diminished even when they heard the click of a key in the lock.

GERARD was now inspecting the room; and he went to the one window, through whose small and deep-set panes he could see only the pressing darkness of a night that was veritably solid, as if the whole place were buried beneath the earth and were closed in by clinging mold. Then, with an access of unsmothered rage at his separation from Fleurette, he ran to the door and hurled himself against it, he beat upon it with his clenched fists, but in vain. Realizing his folly, and desisting at last, he turned to Raoul.

"Well, Raoul," he said, "what do you think of all this?"

Raoul crossed himself before he answered; and his face had assumed the vizard of a mortal fear.

"I think, Messire," he finally replied, "that we have all been decoyed by a malefic sorcery; and that you, myself, the demoiselle Fleurette, and the maid Angelique, are all in deadly peril of both soul and body."

"That, also, is my thought," said Gerard. "And I believe it would be well that you and I should sleep only by turns; and that he who keeps vigil should retain in his hands my hornbeam staff, whose end I shall now sharpen with my dagger. I am sure that you know the manner in which it should be employed if there are any intruders; for if such should come, there would be no doubt as to their character and their intentions. We are in a castle which has no legitimate existence, as the guests of people who have been dead, or supposedly dead, for more than two hundred years. And such people, when they stir abroad, are prone to habits which I need not specify."

"Yes, Messire." Raoul shuddered, but he watched the sharpening of the staff with considerable interest. Gerard whittled the hard wood to a lance-like point, and hid the shavings carefully. He even carved the outline of a little cross near the middle of the staff, thinking that this might increase its efficacy or save it from molestation. Then, with the staff in his hand, he sat down upon the bed, where he could survey the litten room from between the curtains.

"You can sleep first, Raoul." He indicated the couch, which was near the door.

The two conversed in a fitful man-

ner for some minutes. After hearing Raoul's tale of how Fleurette, Angelique and himself had been led astray by the sobbing of a woman amid the pines, and had been unable to retrace their way, the troubadour changed the theme. And henceforth he spoke idly and of matters remote from his real preoccupations, to fight down his torturing concern for the safety of Fleurette. Suddenly he became aware that Raoul had ceased to reply; and saw that the servant had fallen asleep on the couch. At the same time an irresistible drowsiness surged upon Gerard himself in spite of all his volition, in spite of the eldritch terrors and forebodings that still murmured in his brain. He heard through his growing hebetude a whisper as of shadowy wings in the castle halls; he caught the sibilation of ominous voices, like those of familiars that respond to the summoning of wizards; and he seemed to hear, even in the vaults and towers and remote chambers, the tread of feet that were hurrying on malign and secret errands. But oblivion was around him like the meshes of a sable net; and it closed in relentlessly upon his troubled mind, and drowned the alarms of his agitated senses.

WHEN Gerard awoke at length, the tapers had burned to their sockets; and a sad and sunless daylight was filtering through the window. The staff was still in his hand; and though his senses were still dull with the strange slumber that had drugged them, he felt that he was unharmed. But peering between the curtains, he saw that Raoul was lying mortally pale and lifeless on the couch, with the air and look of an exhausted moribund.

He crossed the room, and stooped above the servant. There was a small red wound on Raoul's neck; and his pulses were slow and feeble, like those of one who has lost a great amount of blood. His very appearance was withered and vein-drawn. And a phantom spice arose from the couch—a lingering wraith of the perfume worn by the chatelaine Agathe.

Gerard succeeded at last in arousing the man; but Raoul was very weak and drowsy. He could remember nothing of what had happened during the night; and his horror was pitiful to behold when he realized the truth.

"It will be your turn next, Messire," he cried. "These vampires mean to hold us here amid their unhallowed necromancies till they have drained us of our last drop of blood. Their spells are like mandragora or the sleepy sirups of Cathay; and no man can keep awake in their despite."

Gerard was trying the door, and somewhat to his surprise he found it unlocked. The departing vampire had been careless, in the lethargy of her repletion. The castle was very still; and it seemed to Gerard that the animating spirit of evil was now quiescent; that the shadowy wings of horror and malignity, the feet that had sped on baleful errands, the summoning sorcerers, the responding familiars, were all lulled in a temporary slumber.

He opened the door, he tiptoed along the deserted hall, and knocked at the portal of the chamber allotted to Fleurette and her maid. Fleurette, fully dressed, answered his knock immediately; and he caught her in his arms without a word, searching her wan face with a tender anxiety. Over her shoulder he could see the maid Angelique, who was sitting listlessly on the bed with a mark on her white neck similar to the wound that had been suffered by Raoul. He knew, even before Fleu-

rette began to speak, that the nocturnal experiences of the demoiselle and her maid had been identical with those of himself and the man-servant.

While he tried to comfort Fleurette and reassure her, his thoughts were now busy with a rather curious problem. No one was abroad in the castle; and it was more than probable that the Sieur du Malinbois and his lady were both asleep after the nocturnal feast which they had undoubtedly enjoyed. Gerard pictured to himself the place and the fashion of their slumber; and he grew even more reflective as certain possibilities occurred to him.

"Be of good cheer, sweetheart," he said to Fleurette. "It is in my mind that we may soon escape from this abominable mesh of enchantments. But I must leave you for a little and speak again with Raoul, whose help I shall require in a certain matter."

He went back to his own chamber. The man-servant was sitting on the couch and was crossing himself feebly and muttering prayers with a faint, hollow voice.

"Raoul," said the troubadour a little sternly, "you must gather all your strength and come with me. Amid the gloomy walls that surround us, the somber ancient halls, the high towers and the heavy bastions, there is but one thing that veritably exists; and all the rest is a fabric of illusion. We must find the reality whereof I speak, and deal with it like true and valiant Christians. Come, we will now search the castle ere the lord and chatelaine shall awaken from their vampire lethargy."

He led the way along the devious corridors with a swiftness that betokened much forethought. He had reconstructed in his mind the hoary pile of battlements and turrets as he had seen them on the previous day; and he felt that the great donjon, being the center and stronghold of the edifice, might well be the place which he sought. With the sharpened staff in his hand, with Raoul lagging bloodlessly at his heels, he passed the doors of many secret rooms, the many windows that gave on the blindness of an inner court, and came at last to the lower story of the donjon-keep.

It was a large, bare room, entirely built of stone, and illumined only by narrow slits high up in the wall, that had been designed for the use of archers. The place was very dim; but Gerard could see the glimmering outlines of an object not ordinarily to be looked for in such a situation, that arose from the middle of the floor. It was a tomb of marble; and stepping nearer, he saw that it was strangely weather-worn and was blotched by lichens of gray and yellow, such as flourish only within access of the sun. The slab that covered it was doubly broad and massive, and would require the full strength of two men to lift.

Raoul was staring stupidly at the tomb. "What now, Messire?" he queried.

"You and I, Raoul, are about to intrude upon the bedchamber of our host and hostess."

At his direction, Raoul seized one end of the slab; and he himself took the other. With a mighty effort that strained their bones and sinews to the cracking-point, they sought to remove it; but the slab hardly stirred. At length, by grasping the same end in unison, they were able to tilt the slab; and it slid away and dropped to the floor with a thunderous crash. Within, there were two open coffins, one of which contained the Sieur Hugh du Malinbois and the other his lady Agathe. Both of them appeared to be

slumbering peacefully as infants; a look of tranquil evil, of pacified malignity, was imprinted upon their features; and their lips were dyed with a fresher scarlet than before.

Without hesitation or delay, Gerard plunged the lance-like end of his staff into the bosom of the Sieur du Malinbois. The body crumbled as if it were wrought of ashes kneaded and painted to a human semblance; and a slight odor as of age-old corruption arose to the nostrils of Gerard. Then the troubadour pierced in like manner the bosom of the chatelaine. And simultaneously with her dissolution, the walls and floor of the donjon seemed to dissolve like a sullen vapor, they rolled away on every side with a shock as of unheard thunder. With a sense of indescribable vertigo and confusion Gerard and Raoul saw that the whole château had vanished like the towers and battlements of a bygone storm; that the dead lake and its rotting shores no longer offered their malefical illusions to the eye. They were standing in a forest-glade, in the full unshadowed light of the afternoon sun; and all that remained of the dismal castle was the lichen-mantled tomb that stood open beside them. Fleurette and her maid were a little distance away; and Gerard ran to the mercer's daughter and took her in his arms. She was dazed with wonderment, like one who emerges from the night-long labyrinth of an evil dream, and finds that all is well.

"I think, sweetheart," said Gerard, "that our next rendezvous will not be interrupted by the Sieur du Malinbois and his chatelaine."

But Fleurette was still bemused with wonder, and could only answer him with a kiss.

ANNOUNCEMENT!

The size of WEIRD TALES *will be increased to 160 pages, beginning with the February issue.*

Think of it! 160 pages of the finest weird stories written today. All your favorite writers will continue to appear.

Watch for this bigger and better WEIRD TALES *on the newstand.*

THE EYRIE

YOU, the readers of WEIRD TALES, have sent us a veritable flood of letters expressing your fear that the change of publisher may result in a deterioration of the magazine's contents, the elimination of Virgil Finlay's exquisite illustrations from our pages, or some other equally serious calamity. We hasten to reassure you, and the thousands of readers who have *not* written in, that we shall continue to give you the best weird fiction written today, and maintain the literary and artistic standards which have built the reputation of this magazine through the sixteen years of its existence, and placed it far ahead of all others in its field. Any other policy would be suicidal. We shall continue to use Virgil Finlay's art, which you have so highly admired, and his pictorial interpretations of passages of great weird verse will be a feature of the magazine. All the great writers of weird fiction will be represented in our pages: Clark Ashton Smith, whose story in this issue is one of the finest vampire stories ever penned; Seabury Quinn, creator of the inimitable Jules de Grandin; the late H. P. Lovecraft, supreme master of fantastic fiction; Edmond Hamilton, voyager in the spaces between the stars; C. L. Moore, author of *Shambleau* and creator of Northwest Smith; Clifford Ball, creator of Duar the accursed and Rald the intrepid soldier of fortune; H. Warner Munn, author of *The Werewolf of Ponkert;* David H. Keller, Donald Wandrei, Paul Ernst, August W. Derleth, and those two amazing youngsters, Robert Bloch and Henry Kuttner. We hope to justify the faith of all our loyal readers, and make many new friends for the magazine.

Different and Rather Creepy

Kenneth R. Blakerly writes from St. Albans, New York: "Have been reading your magazine since 1925, and wish to thank you for many happy and exciting hours. This is my first letter to you. Again Seabury Quinn scores with *Lynne Foster Is Dead,* which is one swell story, different and rather creepy. . . . Can't you do something about Robert E. Howard's great character, Conan? At least give us some reprints of his early exploits, or print a book with all his adventures in and put me down for the first copy regardless of cost." [We plan to reprint some of the stories about Conan, in our reprint department.—THE EDITOR.]

A Diffident Suggestion

Ted Kohler writes from New York City: "I'm another who, after having read WEIRD TALES almost from the first issue, am plucking up my courage to write. Concerning your reprints, I have a diffident suggestion: Why not carry, as a definite and pre-announced series, the twelve best and most popular weird tales of your magazine's entire history? I've read them all, or most of them—*The Woman of the Wood, The Outsider, When the Green Star Waned,* all the way down to *Roads.* I know that some have been reprinted, but a superlative tale bears retelland re-retelling. Think of it—the best weird tales of history, in steady single file throughout one year! Perhaps other of your readers

will have something to say about this suggestion. Your current (November) issue is splendid. Seabury Quinn's story about Lynne Foster is almost breath-takingly strange—a great story."

Alias Trudy?

Caroline Ferber writes from Chicago: "Kelley's *I Found Cleopatra* is one of those marvelous things that sorta stick with you. This afternoon I caught myself wondering if it was a dream, a movie or what—the actual picture was so vividly portrayed in my mind. Good old Thorp McClusky threw in a fairly good chiller, altho his vampire yarns are more shuddery. Ah-who!—Bloch's *The Hound of Pedro* was a roaring good 'un. The strangest yarn I ever read was Quinn's *Lynne Foster Is Dead,* altho I had read of the transfer of souls—in the great Sahara region. The whole story was so absorbing. This is sort of an African issue, adding Lovecraft's *The Nameless City,* which followed his usual—or rather—unusual style of fear and fascination. Repulsive were those queer 'has-beens' in the golden coffins—and when the brazen gate closed, I hovered in midair, gasping. The reprint, *Leonora,* was one of the eye-widening chillers—oh, so frightening! the more so that I must confess my ignorance of the legend of Leonora. Howard's verse, *Recompense,* is one for my collection. And now — puhleeze allow more space for the Eyrie. It's sort of a confab fest each month—familiar names all around —it felt like a meeting of old friends. But six letters isn't enuff for all the readers you have. I am rather dull this month, but wouldn't feel faithful unless I had written my few lines."

Great Yarn

Donald V. Allgeier writes from Licking, Missouri: "November was certainly an issue of surprises. . . . The stories were good, as usual. I pick *Lynne Foster Is Dead* by Seabury Quinn for first place. Again his master touch is in evidence. Of course comparisons with the same author's *Strange Interval* are inevitable. The mood is the same and the conflict similar. Both are great yarns. *I Found Cleopatra* begins well and ties for second place with *The Thing in the Trunk.* Ernst can certainly handle weird atmosphere. *Leonora* was an excellent reprint."

Not Discarded

Richard H. Jamison writes from Valley Park, Missouri: "I notice that WEIRD has changed publishers, and also, it seems, artists. This will probably be one of many letters you will get remarking that the change will be a sad one if it results in a change of artists. It took WEIRD nearly fifteen years to find an artist capable of doing as good a job on the illustrations as the authors were doing on the stories. I refer, of course, to Virgil Finlay. After two years of Virgil it's quite a come-down to look at the uninspired work in the November issue; like going off a diet of chicken, steak and ice cream to one of dry bread, water, and quinine. Finlay was universally praised by the readers; the master, Lovecraft, wrote a poem in commendation of his work—and the new regime would do well to think twice before shunting him into the discard."

Aimless and Beautiful

Joe Aloigi writes from Los Angeles: "How come the new typography all of a sudden, all unannounced? Where is Virgil Finlay? How come M. Brundage is not on the cover this month? How come WT's change of address from Chicago to New York? Anyhow, I rate this month's (November's) stories thus: 1. *Fothergill's Jug.* Not new by any means, but well done. 2. *Lynne Foster Is Dead.* Seabury is aimless and beautiful as usual. (Incidentally, I thought *Roads* was one of his poorest.) 3. *The Thing in the Trunk.* Plot faintly reminiscent of Poe, but well handled."

Lynne Foster Is Dead

William B. Cronican writes from Crown Point, Indiana: "I have been a more or less constant reader of WT since the days when Hugh Rankin did the illustrations. I have never written before, but this last issue impels me to do so. I have long thought that Seabury Quinn was your best author, cer-

COMING NEXT MONTH

THE BIG TENT was crowded. There was an air of grim waiting, as if the spectators were *expecting* something. I knew what they expected: hadn't the papers been full of "the Hoodoo Circus" for the past three days? There was a low murmur as of massed whispering voices. I thought of a Roman amphitheater and shuddered.

The big drums rolled. The parade swept into view, and I cast an anxious glance at the side entrance when it cleared. There were my two guards, armed with guns. No trouble tonight! And the rajah was safe, with me.

The Sacred Elephant swept into view, serene, majestic, lumbering gigantically on ivory hoofs. There was only one Hindoo leading him tonight, and—the howdah was on his back!

In it sat—Leela, the High Priestess of Ganesha.

"She knows," breathed the rajah, his brown face suddenly animal-like with terror. Leela was smiling. . . . Then horror came.

The lights flickered, failed, blinked out. The vast tent plunged into darkness and the band ceased playing. There was a rising wail of sound, and I rose in my seat with a scream on my lips.

There in the darkness glowed the silver elephant—the Sacred White Elephant of Jadhore. Like a leprous monster, its body gleamed with phosphorescent fire. And in the darkness I saw Leela's eyes.

The elephant had turned now, and left the parade. As shrieks rose in a thousand throats it thundered forward—straight for our box.

The rajah broke from my grasp and vaulted over the railing to the ground. My hand flew to my pocket, and I cursed in dismay. The knife he had given me was gone. Then my eyes returned to the hideous tableau before me. . . .

You will not want to miss this vivid and fascinating weird story of a circus, a sacred white elephant, and the series of dreadful deaths that haunted the dreams of the rajah of Jadhore. It will be printed complete in the February issue of WEIRD TALES.

DEATH IS AN ELEPHANT

By Nathan Hindin

——Also——

THE DOUBLE SHADOW

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

A fascinating weird fantasy about strange shadows, and things that should creep rather than walk, by a master craftsman of fantastic fiction.

FEARFUL ROCK

By MANLEY WADE WELLMAN

An eery tale of the American Civil War, and the uncanny evil being who called himself Persil Mandifer, and his lovely daughter—a tale of dark powers and weird happenings.

THE POLTERGEIST OF SWAN UPPING

By SEABURY QUINN

A brilliant exploit of Jules de Grandin, the mercurial little French scientist, occult detective and ghost-breaker—a story about a murderous elemental.

February Issue Of Weird Tales . . . . Out January 1

tainly your most consistent, being uniformly good; and now, in *Lynne Foster Is Dead,* he has hit an all-time high. I have read most of his work, including *Roads* and *Fortune's Fools,* but though I enjoyed them immensely, this last one tops them all. I find that I have an ideal place to read your magazine, as I am a radio operator employed at a lonely station in the middle of a prairie. When alone out there at midnight, and the cold winter winds whistle and moan through the antennæ, I find that I can really get into the spirit of the magazine."

Afraid of Attics

E. B. Hardy writes from Lewiston, Maine: "In the October issue I find *Jekal's Lesson* by David Bernard the weirdest. There is something about it——! Next to this story is *Black Moon.* Seabury Quinn's stories are always very welcome, if for no other reason than because of that very lively little fellow, the very human Doctor de Grandin. *Up Under the Roof,* by Manly Wade Wellman, strikes an answering chord within me, because I used to be afraid of attics and cellars when I was a small child—especially cellars. A a rule, serials do not interest me, but I must confess that *The Fire Princess,* by Edmond Hamilton, seemed different from the average. A most wonderful person, the princess Shirani, and one serial with a really fine ending. Give us more stories like *The Fire Princess* and *The Black Drama* and I believe I will become a serial enthusiast myself."

Weird and Spooky

Miss Annabelle Lantz writes from Chicago: "The November issue lacked the dignity and mystery that the former issues possessed. The stories were still up to standard—weird and spooky—but how can the reader enjoy them if he hasn't got the feeling that he's reading a magazine that is different? I missed Brundage's exotic cover and Finlay's delicate illustrations and the short stories that are usually present at the back of the book. In fact, the entire magazine fell below its usual high par as far as its layout is concerned. Please don't dispense with our old-style book! Give us back the same print and illustrations that gave the magazine the aura of dignity and mystery that the November issue lacked, so that we can get that old goose-pimply feeling as soon as we pick up the magazine."

Scared Off by the Cover

Margaret Runyan writes from Severns Park, Maryland: "What is the matter with the current (November) issue of WT? It seems different somehow. No Virgil Finlay pictures either. I enjoy those illustrations almost as well as the stories. His pictures have such a feeling of 'other-worldliness' about them, they put me in a mood for the story they illustrate. More power to him! I don't care so much for the lurid covers. They scared me off for quite a while, as I thought the magazine was one of those common trashy 'nasty' books. Glad to say I have found nothing remotely resembling it, in any of your issues."

Land of Dreams

R. R. Christoffel writes from Brussels: "Where are those lovely tales of beautiful magic spheres, of deep mystic lore, of the higher planes of nature and of the Guardians of the Laws of the Worlds? The great philosopher Nietsche said somewhere, 'In every man is the child, and it wants to play.' WT was just one of those glorious playgrounds for all the big children, where we could find again our land of dreams, ride with the knights of King Arthur, sail to the mysterious lands of Atlantis and the White Isles, fly through space on patrol ships to help and see the other beings, strange and weird. These are, I believe, the stories which give us joy and love and a strong feeling for everything that lives, known and unknown. Please give us more such stories."

Seabury Quinn's Stories

George C. Bowring writes from Los Angeles: "I have never cared for the Jules de Grandin stories, and quit reading Seabury Quinn for that reason. After reading so many plaudits for his story, *Roads,* however, I decided to read it, and enjoyed it more than

anything I'd read for a long time. On the strength of that experience, I decided to read *As 'Twas Told to Me,* and got another pleasant surprise. So have Quinn steer clear of Jules de Grandin in favor of other types of stories. Please continue to print poems. They are excellent. How about a Finlay drawing for the best poem in each issue?" [Jules de Grandin has so many thousand admirers among our readers that we feel we should be doing a disservice to them if we allowed Mr. Quinn to kill off this well-beloved brain-child of his. However, Mr. Quinn *is* writing more and more stories without the mercurial little Frenchman in them.—THE EDITOR.]

The Sea-Witch

Willis Conover, Jr., writes from Cambridge, Maryland: "This morning I read *The Sea-Witch* of Nictzin Dyalhis for the third time. It is one of the finest stories you have published in years. Only two other stories in WT can possibly match its genuine beauty: Seabury Quinn's *Roads,* and—a new Dyalhis tale. Grab up some more of his stuff, will you? And *soon!*"

Changed

Leah Bodine Drake writes from Owensboro, Kentucky: "Where is the One-And-Only Mrs. Brundage? I missed her luscious maiden on the cover, and I'm mad! And where is our Virgil? He has no poem-picture this month (November), and that is one feature that I particularly liked and watched for. I liked Jim Mooney's picture, too, for *Beyond the Phoenix* last month, although I do not really think mystery stories should have illustrations, as a rule. And where is Clark Ashton Smith? And how come you've cut down on the letter department? I always enjoyed reading the readers' opinions so much, as they were all of interest, and written evidently by highly educated people. As for the stories this month, I like *Fothergill's Jug* the best; *Lynne Foster Is Dead* the next; and *The Hound of Pedro* third best. I imagine that the serial about Cleopatra is going to be fine; but I am going to read it all in one piece, as it were—keep the install-

NEXT MONTH

The Poltergeist of Swan Upping

By SEABURY QUINN

WHAT would you do if you were one of those murderous little elemental spirits which the Germans call "Poltergeister"? This was the question Jules de Grandin asked himself; and by placing his own mind on the same level with the malignant elemental he got a good idea of what the creature was planning to do next in the tragic occurrences at Swan Upping.

IF YOU have not yet made the acquaintance of the versatile Jules de Grandin, ghost-breaker, scientist and occult detective, you have the opportunity of meeting him in this engrossing novelet. It will be published complete

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ments until I have them all. I'm through reading serials as such—they leave me too excited at the end of an installment, and having to wait a whole month before you know whether or not the train runs over the heroine, as it were, is too much! Now please bring back Finlay, C. A. Smith and a longer letter-department, more poems—and please, oh please reprint *The Woman of the Wood* by A. Merritt. I've asked it once, I've asked it twice—I'll keep on asking until I've had a chance to read this famous tale!"

Concise Comments

Howard B. MacDonald writes from Yonkers, New York: "I see you have moved to New York. That's fine. It seems to indicate that WEIRD TALES is growing nicely. I only hope this move does not mean a permanent loss of Mrs. Brundage's lovely covers, or a cheapening in any way of the magazine."

Gerald W. Meader writes from Rumford, Maine: "A month is a long time to wait between issues. Wouldn't it be possible to issue it twice a month, or at least publish a quarterly or an annual? Why not take a vote on this from us readers; there must be a lot who feel the way I do on this."

John F. Burke writes from Liverpool, England: "Please reprint some of the old classics instead of this Hawthorne tripe. Let's have *The Gates of the Silver Key,* and all those other stories I hear so much about. Best reprints in recent issues have been *The Girl from Samarcand* and *When the Graves Were Opened.*"

Delayed in Transit

Herbert Vincent Ross writes from London, England: "Comes my monthly letter to let you know how the stories lined up with me in the July issue of our fascinating magazine. Good old Seabury Quinn takes first place again with me for his beautiful work in *Fortune's Fools,* a real weird tale of old France, which had just about everything: romance, action, mystery, and true weirdness. More, please! Next comes *Return to the Sabbath* by Robert Bloch, a study in pure horror, which might have come from the pen of Poe or Lovecraft. Hamilton's *He That Hath Wings* takes third place, a fine piece of fantasy which becomes poetic in places. *The Black Drama* is, I think, even better than *The Hairy Ones Shall Dance,* and it is of real interest to anyone who knows anything of Lord Byron and his works; Gans T. Field must become a 'regular' in WEIRD TALES. *Mother of Toads* was odd, as are most of C. A. Smith's works, but somehow it was not up to his usual fine contributions. *Escape* by Paul Ernst, was a good example of a 'short short story' and original in idea. . . . Long's *The Defense Rests* was a good tale, but somehow I dislike these modern settings for weird tales. The reprint by that old master, E. Hoffmann Price, was a very fine tale and I do not remember reading it in the original, but I think it followed a bit close on *The Girl from Samarcand,* which was also about Oriental rugs, by the same author. Please reprint Moore's *Shambleau,* it was a strange tale, and it has had many requests in the Eyrie. *The Messenger* by the one and only H. P. L. was weird verse at its best, a worthy successor to *The Canal.* I must mention also Howard's *Ships,* which had a beauty of its own in the subject matter, and it is hard to think that both these superb authors have passed on, perhaps into the strange realms of which they wrote so often, and that we shall have no more works from their matchless pens. . . . Now about the reprints, which you ask us to comment on: For my part I should like to see reprints from anywhere, and from any language, as long as they are really weird, and are not serials."

Most Popular Story

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? And if there are any stories that you dislike, we want to know about those, too; for such expressions of opinion help us to keep the magazine as you like it. Won't you write us a letter, or a postcard, telling what you think of us? Send it to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York. The most popular story in our November issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was Seabury Quinn's strange and romantic tale, *Lynne Foster Is Dead.*

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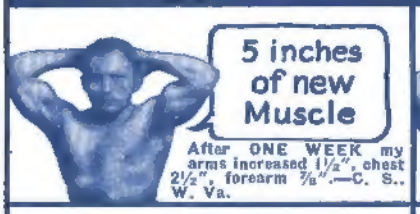

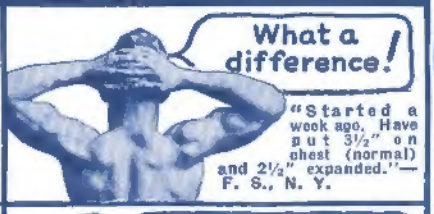

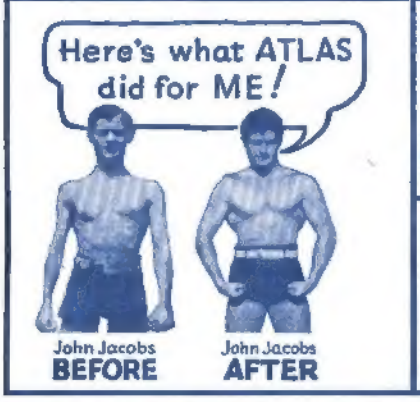

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